Autumn 1999

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David Sylvester with Richard Serra
Gabriel Josipovici on Rembrandt
John Spurling on Bridget Riley
Bryan Robertson on Anthony Caro
Craig Raine on Oldenburg
Julian Mitchell in Venice
Georges Szirtes on Ana Maria Pacheco
Richard Wollheim on Museums
Tom Paulin a new poem

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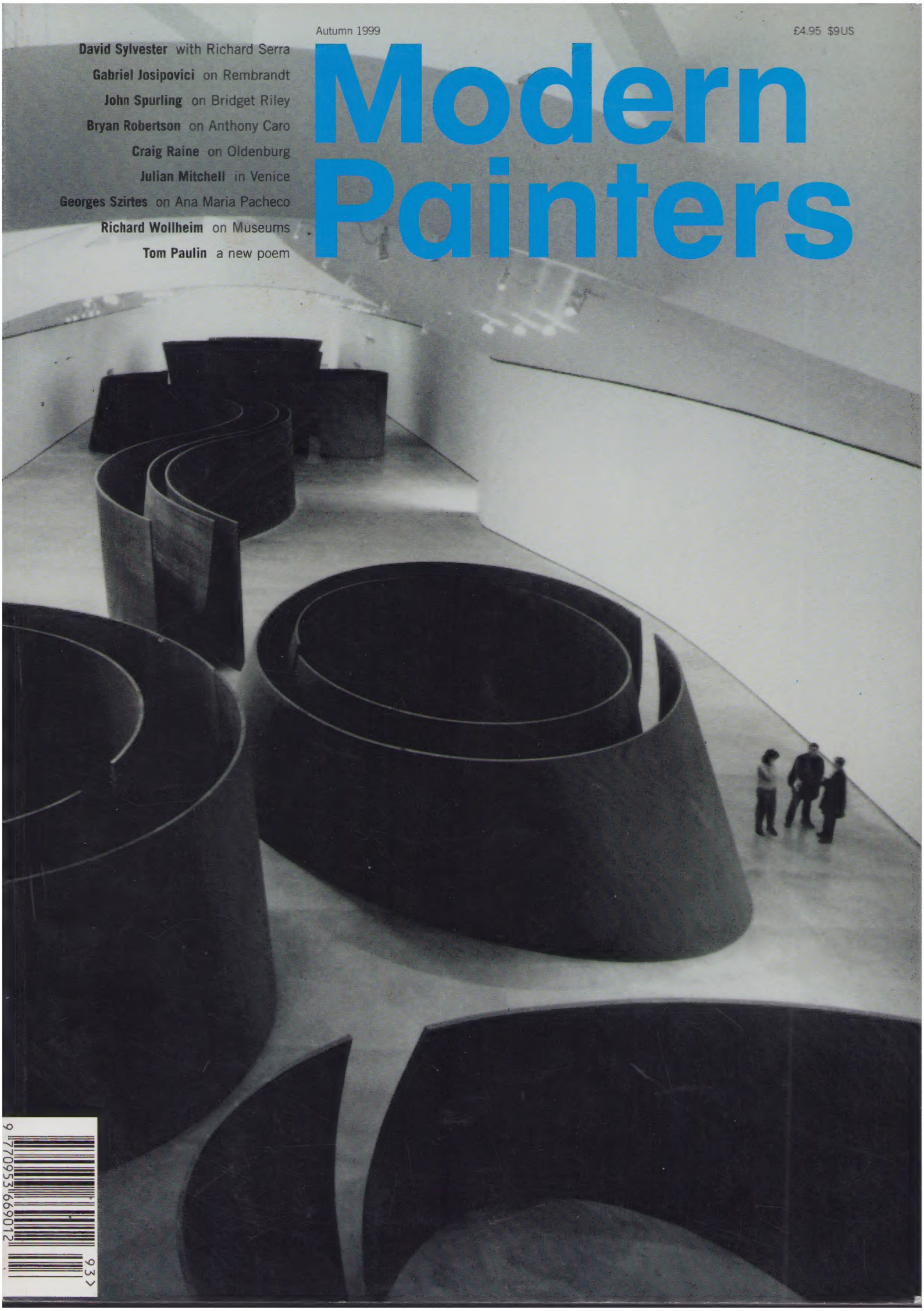

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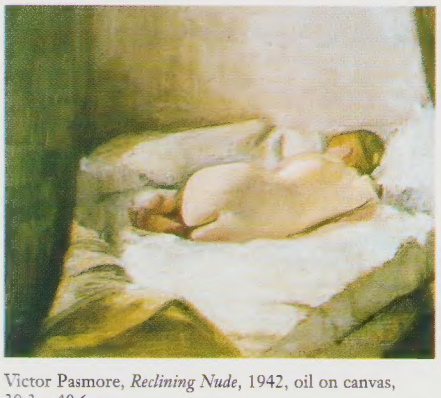

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CONSUMER PRESS
23,303 (January–June 1999)

Cover: Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* at the Guggenheim, Bilbao
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Lynn Chadwick, *The Inner Eye (Maquette III)*, 1952.

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Our Contributors

Dore Ashton's
books include *A Fable of Modern Art* and, most recently, *The Delicate Thread: Teshigahara's Life in Art*. Her most recent exhibition and catalogue is 'A Rebours: The Informal Rebellion', at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid until 11 October, which includes works by artists from all over the world from 1939–1968.

A S Byatt's
most recent book is *Elementals, Stories of Fire and Ice*, from Chatto & Windus.

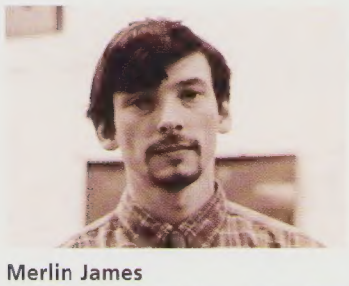
Matthew Collings
is the author of *Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop: The London artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hurst* and *It Hurts, New York art from Warhol to now*, both from 21. *This is Modern Art*, his book based on his Channel 4 television series, is published by Wiedenfeld and Nicolson.

William Corbett's
new book of poems, *Boston Vermont*, is published by Zoland Books.

Lance Esplund
lives in New York City and teaches at the Parsons School of Design. He is a critic for *Art in America* and contributes regularly to *Modern Painters*.

Martin Gayford
is a regular contributor to *Modern Painters*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Spectator*. He is co-editor with Karen Wright of *The Penguin Book of Art Writing*, recently published by Viking.

Derek Hyatt
is a painter and writer. His recent exhibition at the Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield, 'The Shaping Power', traced the thinking of Turner, Ruskin and Coleridge on memory and imagination, with texts accompanied by sequences of his own drawings. Touring enquiries to 01937 572265.



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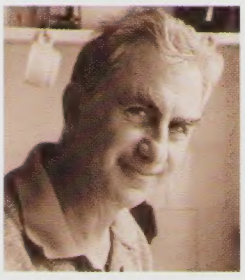

Gabriel Josipovici's
most recent novel, *Now*, was published in 1998 by Carcanet. His critical study *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion* is published this autumn by Yale University Press.

Tom Lubbock
is art critic and Saturday cartoonist for *The Independent*.

Julian Mitchell's
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Norbert Lynton,
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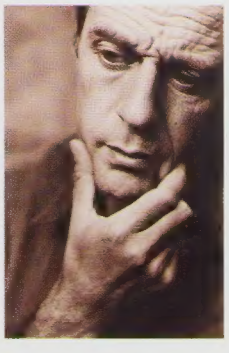

Tom Paulin's
new book of poems, *The Wind Dog*, will be published in November by Faber & Faber.

Craig Raine
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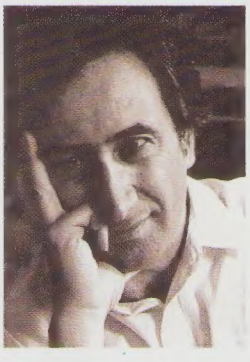
Bryan Robertson
is a broadcaster and writer whose books include *Jackson Pollock* and *Sidney Nolan*.

Stephen Snoddy
has been Exhibitions Director of the Cornerhouse, Manchester, and Director of Southampton City Art Gallery. Last year he moved to Milton Keynes to direct the construction of a new gallery opening this autumn as part of a £30 million theatre and gallery complex.

John Spurling
is a playwright and novelist. His latest play, commissioned for this year's Cheltenham Literary Festival, is *King Arthur's Avalon*. His last novel, *After Zenda*, was published in 1995 by André Deutsch. He was the New Statesman's art critic from 1976–88; his first piece of art criticism was on Bridget Riley.

David Sylvester
is curating an exhibition of the work of Ken Adam, the film production designer, which is to open at the Serpentine Gallery, London, on 17 November.

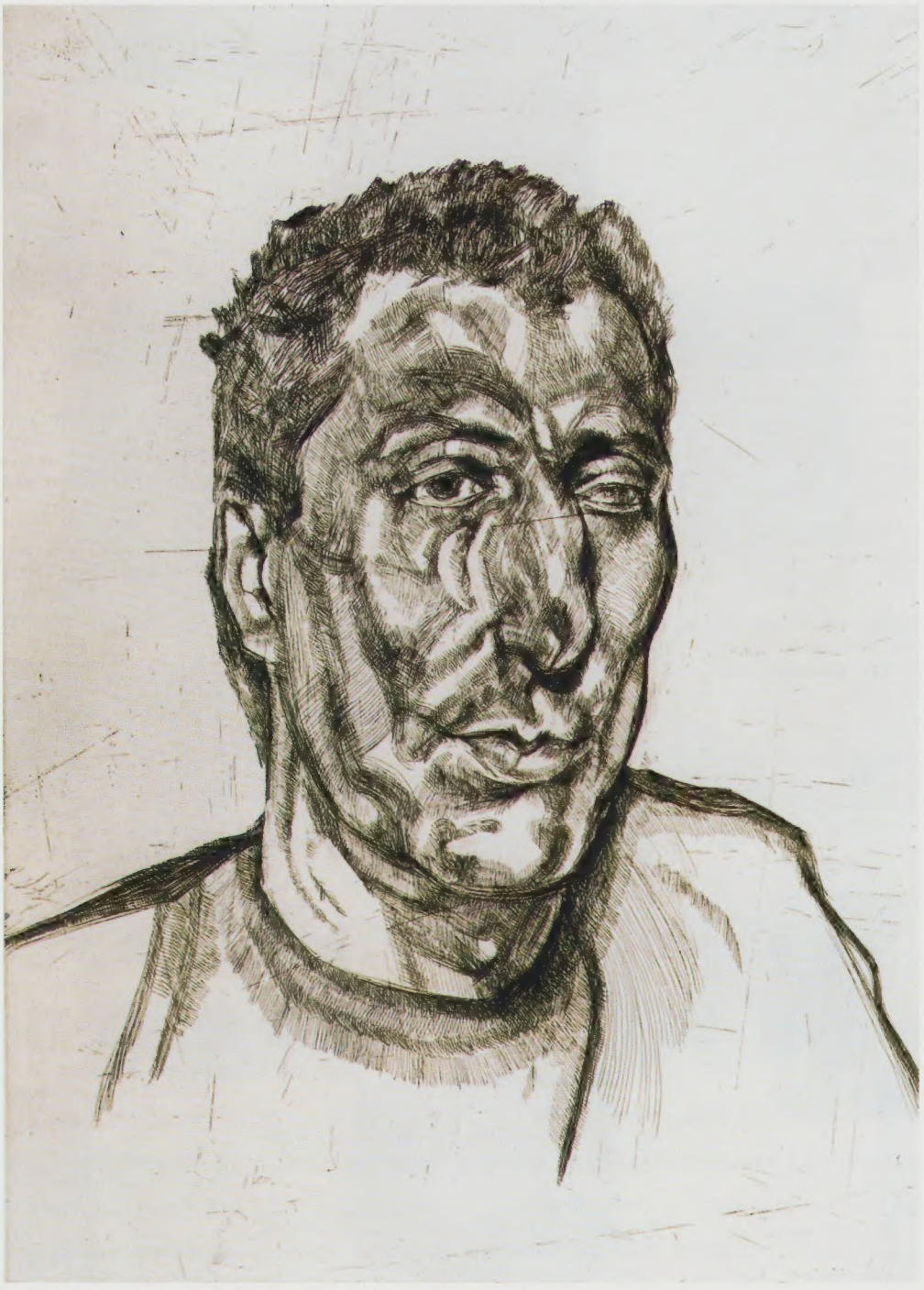


George Szirtes,
poet and translator, was trained as an artist. His *Selected Poems* appeared in 1996. His most recent book is *Portrait of my Father in an English Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Sarah Whitfield
is the curator of the Lucio Fontana exhibition, opening at the Hayward Gallery in October.

Richard Wollheim
teaches philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. His new book, *On the Emotions*, will be published by Yale University Press this autumn. He has written on the visual arts in *Painting as an Art* (Thames and Hudson).

Lucian Freud



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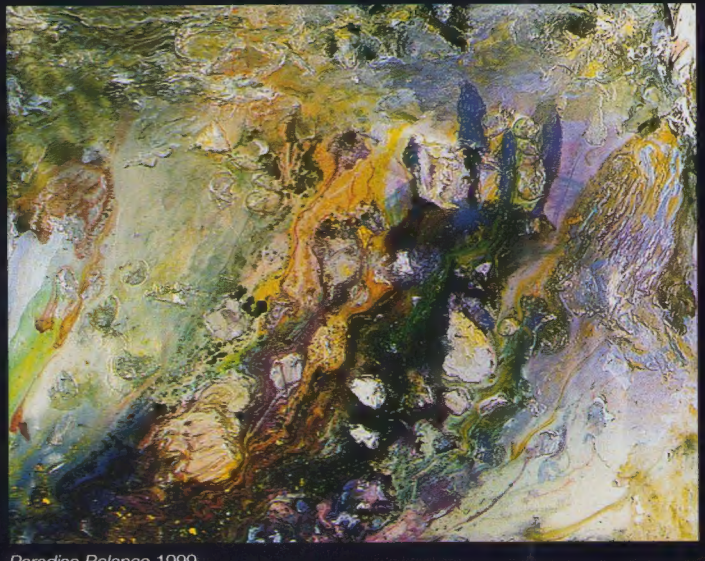

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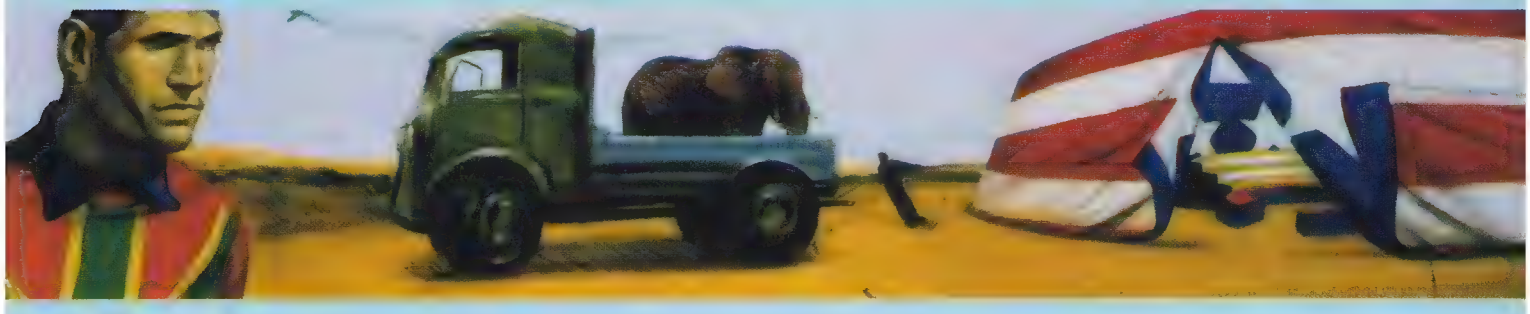

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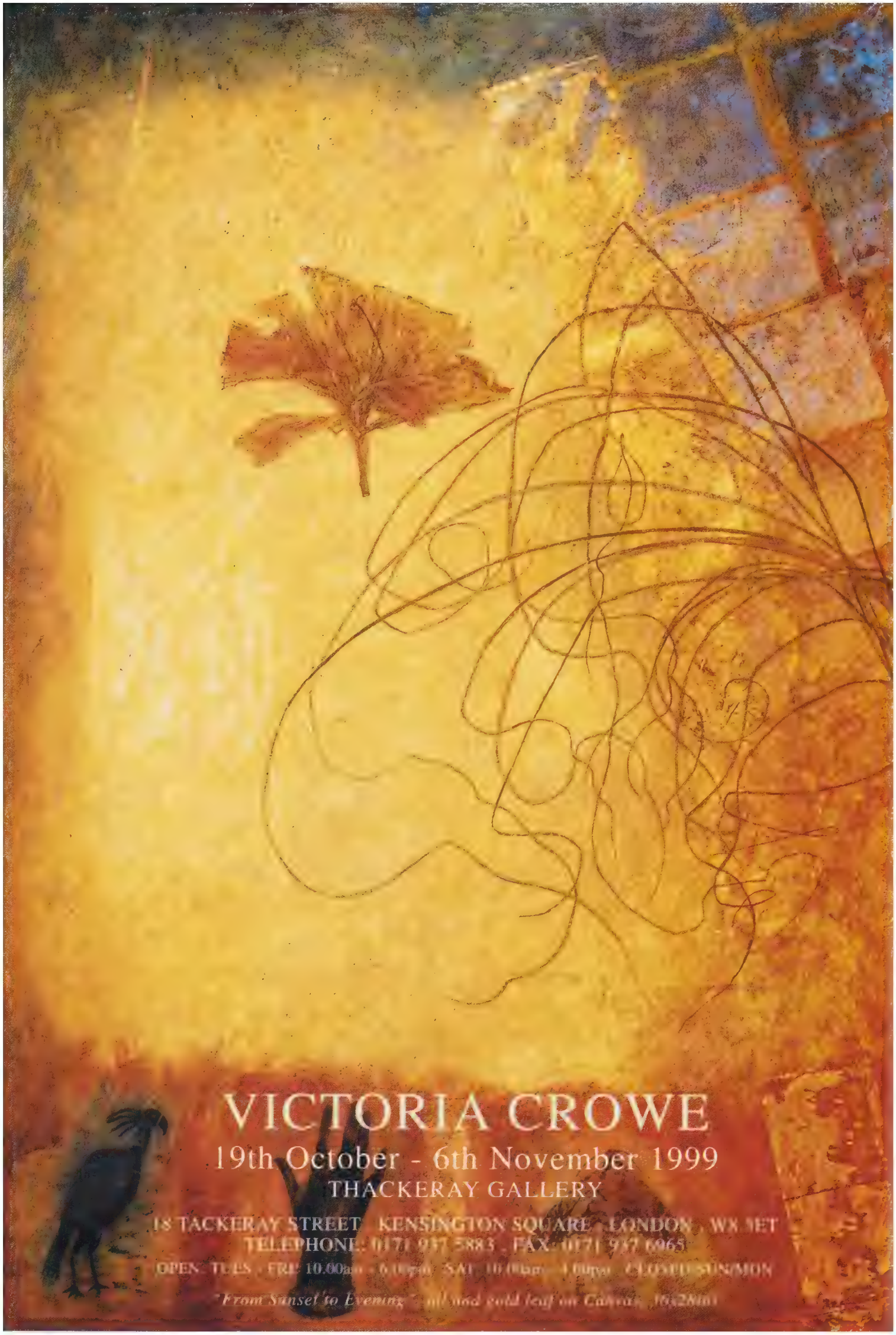
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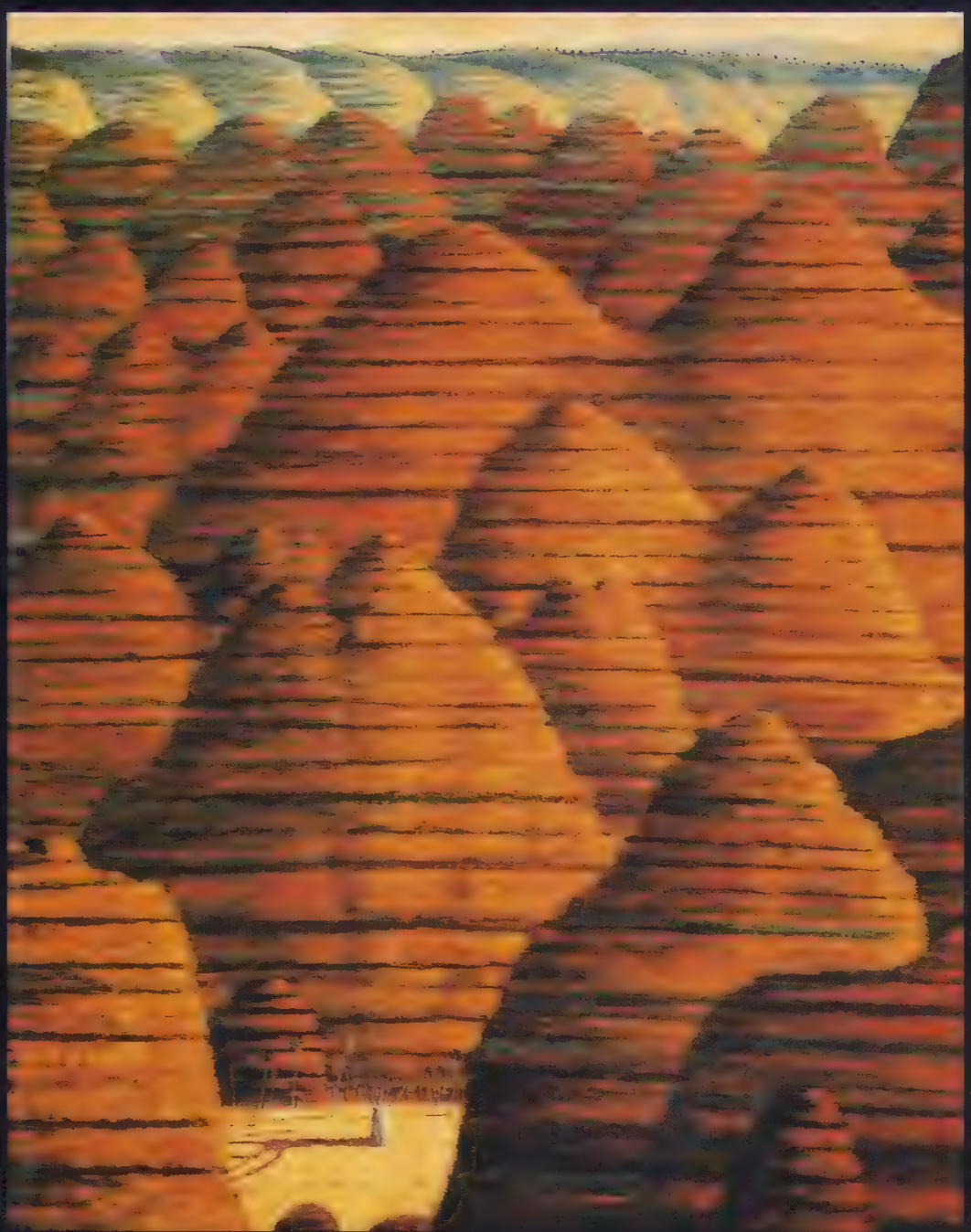

Dawn Arrival, Purnululu, 1999 oil on linen. 244 x 191 cm.

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BBC

Gabriel Josipovici

Beyond Personality

Rembrandt's self-portraits: the human face in the process of time

Rembrandt, *The Painter in His Studio*, *c.*1629, oil on wood, 25.1 × 31.9 cm

Tucked away in the first gallery of this impressive exhibition of Rembrandt's self-portraits is a remarkable little painting of 1629, now in Boston. It shows a young painter in the far corner of his studio, brush and palette in hand, gazing intently at a canvas that dominates the painting. We cannot see the work in progress, but the easel, the floorboards, the cracked wall and the old door are all carefully depicted. The distance between the painter and his canvas is emphasised by the slanting light which brings out the rough nature of the floorboards and catches the right-hand edge of the panel on the easel.

There is no way of knowing if the young painter depicted here is in fact Rembrandt himself, for the face under the large black hat is not personalised but only the setting, as it were, for the two black eyes which stare calmly at the painting. It might well be his first pupil, Gerrit Dou, and not Rembrandt at all. But the curators of the show were wise to include it, for it demonstrates one direction in which Rembrandt's work did not go: the direction of Vermeer's lifelong meditation on the relation between painting, painter and viewer, and on the mystery of painting itself – a practice which takes place in ordinary circumstances; which unfolds in time; which is subject to human decisions; and yet which has something magical, supernatural, about it, which makes of the finished work something radically different from the other material elements that make up the room and its furnishings – the wood of the floorboards and door, the easel, the palettes on the wall, the table behind the painter, the clothes he wears.

The next time we see the canvas as well as the artist in this exhibition is in a work from the end of Rembrandt's life, the Louvre *Self-Portrait at the Easel* of 1660. Here there is absolutely no doubt that the painter is Rembrandt himself, for his head fills the centre of the canvas and the easel is relegated to the status of a prop, barely intruding into the pictorial space along the right-hand margin. The artist is here not meditating on his work but staring out at us, as he does in nearly all these works, an ageing man who just happens to be an artist. It is as though he had early made the decision to paint the world and all it offered, and had from then on ceased to be overly concerned with the enigma of art itself.

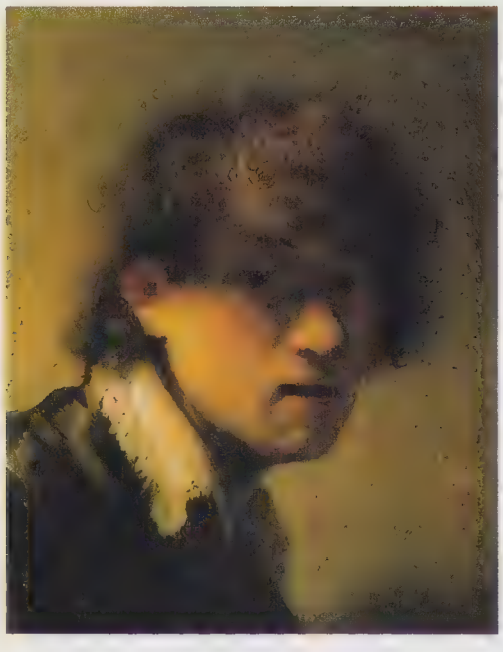
And yet, of course, as with Shakespeare, of whom much the same could be said, the enigma of art, since it is itself part of the great mystery that is the world, inevitably becomes one of his subjects, but tangentially, in the wake of other things.

It is our great good fortune that Rembrandt had a model he was able to return to throughout his working life, and whom we can thus see maturing and then ageing before our eyes. In his early career he uses this most accommodating of models to try out the rhetorical effects of expression and costume, rendering him in drawings, prints and paintings in a variety of postures and guises: as a beggar, as an elegant young man, as the prodigal son, with a plumed beret, tousle-headed, wide-eyed, smiling, grimacing, in oriental attire, with a helmet. In one delightful etching he has reduced his model to a hat and a single eye, as assured of his audience's awareness of who he is and what he is up to as was Picasso when drawing himself as Priapus.

Does the fact that this model is himself make any difference? Of course our Romantic age has always thought so. For it, after all, the artist is the modern saint, his calling and dedication to that calling as mysterious and uplifting

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait, Smiling*, 1630, etching, 5 × 4.4 cm

Rembrandt.
Self-Portrait in Oriental Attire,
1631,
oil on wood,
66.5 × 52 cm.
Petit Palais, Paris



Rembrandt.
Self-Portrait as a Young Man, 1629,
oil on wood,
15.5 × 12.7 cm.
Alte Pinakothek,
Munich

as the calling and dedication of the saint or hermit once was to Christian Europe. For if the artist has heard a voice telling him what has to be done, is that not proof that such a voice does indeed speak to men? If he has found a totally fulfilling way to live, is there not hope that we too may one day find it? These pictures have thus been scrutinised and meditated upon much as Protestant theologians have meditated upon biblical episodes such as Jacob's wrestling with the angel, the sacrifice of Isaac (what did Abraham feel? What did Isaac feel?) and the Passion of Christ. The catalogue is at pains to destroy this way of approaching the work. It points out that in his early work Rembrandt used his own face as a way of exploring rhetorical effects, either human expressions or the fall of light; that in the seventeenth century likenesses of famous artists sold well; that in depicting himself in sixteenth-century garb Rembrandt was making a statement about his affinity with the great artists of that time, especially the Northern school of Dürer, Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck. There is thus, it argues, nothing unique about Rembrandt's self-portraits, no attempt to 'understand himself' or to 'paint his autobiography'.

This is all very salutary, but, as is the way with these debunking exercises by historically orientated scholars, it raises as many questions as it answers, and it closes off problems which should really have been opened up by an exhibition of this kind. Why do Rembrandt's self-portraits come in their dozens, enough to fill four rooms at the National Gallery, while from other artists we have at most five or six? Why does Rembrandt, in his old age, return again and again to his own features in a way unparalleled by any of his contemporaries, and produce thereby some of his greatest works?

These paintings from the 1660s, the last decade of his life, are the glory of the exhibition. In one or two instances we see a new application of the rhetorical trope, for now (in the portraits of the artist as Zeuxis, as St Paul – in the great three-quarter length self-portrait from the Frick, with its glowing golden jerkin – and above all in the familiar large self-portrait from Kenwood House of the ageing artist with palette and maulstick in his left hand) the question becomes, not, what effect does this expression or that make on others? but a much more charged and serious question. Like Donne or the ageing Yeats, Rembrandt here understands rhetoric as much more than a term of art, rather as a way of life. How, he asks in these pictures, do I face the world, in my fame, in my old age? As St Paul preaching the message of the risen Christ? As Zeuxis, the ancient Greek painter, laughing as he paints a gnarled old woman? As a demi-God to whom has been granted the power to create which sets him above ordinary mortals?

But in the most moving paintings, in particular the two that flank the Kenwood self-portrait in this exhibition – his self-portrait from the National's own collection, and the 1669 self-portrait from the Hague – that Donne-like, that Yeatsian self-dramatisation has gone. Donne had himself sculpted in his shroud, an actor to the last, but in these paintings all acting has ceased. As a result we lose our bearings completely. The catalogue is right to insist that we

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, *c.*1665–9, oil on canvas, 114.3 × 94 cm.
Kenwood House, London, courtesy English Heritage

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, 1661, oil on canvas, 93.2 × 79.1 cm

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669, oil on wood, 86 × 70.5 cm. National Gallery, London

should not read into these pictures our notions of what it means to be old (for by so doing we merely substitute psychological clichés for the troubling image before us). But it is silent on how we *should* read these works.

The first thing that has to be said is that they depict the triumph of gravity. Not seriousness but the force that pulls all things down to the earth. Rembrandt's way of working, the freedom of his brushstrokes, the refusal to cover over

Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait*, 1669, oil on canvas, 63.52 × 57.8 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis

or smooth out, is in stark contrast to the great Italian portraits also shown here, which are said to have influenced him: Titian's *Portrait of a Young Man* and Raphael's *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*. The wonder of these early sixteenth-century works, as of those of the Northern artists of the time, is that they seem to give one the very essence of the sitter. What is so difficult about the Rembrandts is that there is no essence. The paint catches the light and brings out the way the skin sags on the bones, the way the eyelids droop, the bursting of innumerable little veins. This is the human face under the aegis of time. We cannot grasp the essence of this person because there is no essence to grasp, only a process which began at birth and will not cease until the moment of death.

What, we might wonder, does the artist feel as he thus describes a moment of his own journey towards oblivion? But as soon as we ask it, in the face of those paintings, we are bound to see that it is the wrong kind of question: the artist does not feel or think anything over and above the task in hand, which is itself a process, the process of making. As that early painting of the artist in his studio showed, there will always be a gap between the act of painting and the consequences of that act. The early picture says, in effect: don't try to bridge the gap, don't try to see what is on the canvas that rests on the easel. The late paintings dispense with the problem altogether as all is swept into process: the finished work is before us but in a sense it is never finished. We move over and around it, follow this brushstroke and that, and we are kept moving from paint to flesh, from paint to hair, from the energy of the mark to the tiredness of the eye, and it is no longer a question of linking process to product, the artist's activity with the painting that has been transported and hung there for our delectation – for looking too is a process, never-ending, under the aegis of time, and as we stand back and look we discover that we too are in the process of ageing, sinking a little further every instant into the earth, so that it is our face we see there on the wall and we marvel that someone who lived so long ago should be able to reveal it to us, now.

'Rembrandt by himself' (originally at the National Gallery, London), 25 September–9 January 2000, Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Sponsored by Thames and Hudson. Catalogue £25hb, £14.95pb.

SERRA in Bilbao

David Sylvester

An interview around and through the Torqued Ellipses currently at the Guggenheim

David Sylvester This is the third time we've recorded something about the *Torqued Ellipses*. The first was when there were three, still at the shipyard. The second was when two of those three and the initial *Double Torqued Ellipse* were shown together at Dia in New York City. And now we're in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao at an exhibition of five single *Ellipses* and three *Doubles* – eight of the ten made up till now. I want to go through them with you in the sequence in which they were made, but would like to begin with a general question. Long before I saw any of them on their full scale, I saw a group of sketch-models in your studio in New York; to what extent do the ten pieces you've realised relate to those initial sketch-models?

Richard Serra The models allowed me to work out the *Torqued Ellipses* in terms of all their basic coordinates, like major to minor axis, height, balance, openings, whatever. They give a useful indication of layout and shape but obviously no indication of what the temporal experience of the large-scale work will be.

DS And how many of the pieces that you've made have a close relationship to the models and how many are different from any of the models?

RS Altogether there are about 60 models. There is a model for each piece I've built, plus those that remain experiments. The bend, the lean, the overhang of the plates, the equilibrium, where the opening needs to be, that's all worked out *fairly* precisely in models usually at a scale of one inch to the foot. The engineers translate the models into digital information.

DS And how many of those models were made before you started to make *any* of the pieces on their own scale?

RS Forty-four. After the Los Angeles exhibition I made five more; three of the pieces based on that group are here. I work most of my pieces out in models. I recently made 32 models for a sculpture where for the first time I use torqued plates in a vertical structure. Four 60-foot plates are torqued in elevation to conform around a parallelogram that is rotated 35 degrees from top to bottom and which gets smaller as it rises in elevation. It has taken nine months to resolve all the problems that came up, and the only way I could resolve them was with models.

DS So there has been a feedback into the models in realising the big ones?

RS Yes, that's a continuous exchange. I need to see each sculpture in full scale to understand its effect. That enables me to decide how to continue the series and what to change in the next group of models. There's a big difference between a plate twelve feet high and one that's fourteen feet high, and there's a big difference between a section that leans two feet and one that leans six feet. Look at *Torqued Ellipse IV*, the work that's going to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that *Ellipse* is relatively low, less than twelve feet, and compare it to the most recent piece, *Torqued Ellipse VI*, which is over fourteen feet high. Two feet make a tremendous difference. *IV* has a much more horizontal torque and turn, *VI* is much more volumetric, pneumatic, it seems to palpitate from the inside out, expanding the outer surface. One of the things that is essential for the variation within this series is that the relationship of major to minor axis differs from piece to piece. That means the shape of the rotating ellipse is different in each sculpture. Because the pieces are not based on a modular elliptical plan, the readout is never similar, never a permutation or inversion. Each sculpture has a particular individual character in that it offers a different solution for the dislocation of space.

DS Yes, there's no duplication at all in their character. Now, at the moment we're in *Torqued Ellipse I*. When I saw this at Dia, it was the piece whose interior, as you went round it, presented the greatest variation, and I find all that variation is present here, in a much taller space with very different lighting. On the other hand, the illusion of the floor sloping, tilting, is nothing like as strong here as it was at Dia.

Title picture: Richard Serra (left)

RS The reason for the illusion of a sloping floor at Dia was that the cross-bracing of the wooden roof structure was very close to the top of the *Ellipses*. The low roof seemed to compress them and tended to compact the space and to put more focus on the ground. When you read an ellipse your eye follows the perimeter of the shape, even a drawing of an ellipse on a piece of paper creates an illusion. This illusion is much stronger when you follow the elliptical curvature of a *Torqued Ellipse* on the ground. You're entering into the *Ellipse* from a stable, known, rectilinear space, which adds to the destabilising effect; also any illusion of a sloping floor is reinforced if a low ceiling compresses the space downward. Here that doesn't occur as much, because the ceiling's very high and open.

DS Do you find too that the greater height here above the tops of the pieces tends to make them look taller?

RS Yes, that's something that I could not have imagined. I would have thought that big pieces in small spaces would have looked bigger than big pieces in big, high spaces, but, as it ends up, the higher the space, the larger the works look. The *Ellipses* soar here where at Dia they seemed to be more contained. They look less heavy here and more sensuous, not as earthbound. There is a difference in the gravitational bearing of the work because of the scale of the room.

DS What about the difference that at Dia you had daylight throughout the gallery whereas here you've got a mixture of daylight and electric light?

RS I don't think the difference in lighting is mainly responsible for the difference in perception. What is more important is that the three pieces at Dia were placed so that you couldn't get back from two of them more than five feet. Dia is a room whereas Bilbao is a hall. The light did contribute to the feeling of compression. It was funnelled through skylights and the shafts of light made for a more cavernous container. I did not want any electric light. The space here is very open, you can sense the circulation, you can stand back and away from each work. Once you walked through the door at Dia, you could not get out of the spaces of the sculptures, you were always within their spatial field. There's more fluidity but also more disjunction in the surrounding space here, particularly because the installation clusters three *Torqued Ellipses* in the front and five in the back, and you have *Snake* in between. The works had to be located on the floor so as to straddle the support beams below ground, which means that their placement was determined by the structural limitations of the load-bearing capacity of the gallery. So I couldn't possibly achieve the density of the arrangement at Dia or the more even distribution of the installation at the Geffen in Los Angeles. Also here you have curves answering curves, not curves in contrast to straight walls. The *Ellipses* don't look as hard here and the ceiling detracts from the delineation of the top edge. Your eye tends to bounce from the curves of the sculpture to the curves of the architecture.

DS In our first interview, when I'd only seen pieces out of doors, you were very emphatic that they had to go indoors. The reason you gave was the importance of having a vertical in relation to which to see the leaning walls.

RS I still think that they work better in relationship to straight vertical walls than to curvilinear walls and ceilings. The curvilinear architecture and its busy baroqueness detract from the exterior volumes of the sculptures. In the ellipses you have the outside of the outside, and then you have the inside of the outside on the outside, and then you have the inside of the inside, and then again you have the outside of the inside on the inside. These pieces continuously ask you to pay attention to their surface as it moves from what you would think is an interior form to an exterior form. In some way they become topologically continuous. That continuity breaks if you start relating them to the rhythms of curvilinear walls and ceilings. Also, the curvilinearity of

Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse I*, 1996, weatherproof steel, overall 365 × 883 × 621 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

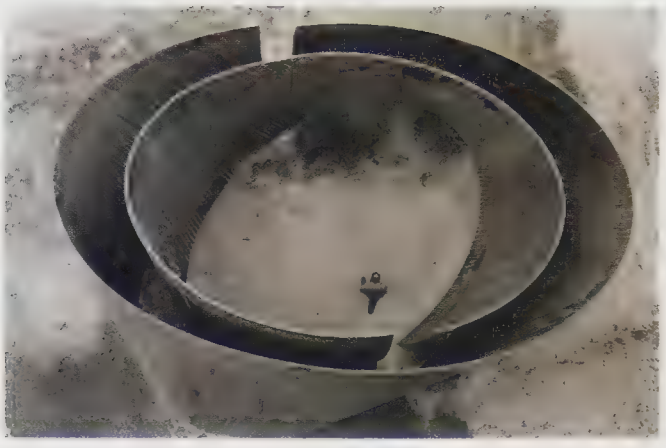
this room is a little soft, a little like cheesecake. If anything, the precision of the *Torqued Ellipses* points to the shoddiness of the drawing in the architecture. The detailing of the sheet-rock is shabby.

DS We're now in *Torqued Ellipse II*. I felt at Dia that this piece was tremendously static, tremendously independent of you, didn't impinge upon you, the spectator, the way that Torqued Ellipse I did, and that it had this wonderful kind of indifference to your presence. Here it's a very good example of how the increase in the space above a piece makes it look taller: it is even grander than it was at Dia, and more imposing and more self-subsistent.
RS There's another reason why this *Ellipse* is static. It differs from all the others in one poignant and particular aspect. The opening into all the other sculptures occurs at the tangent where the top ellipse overlaps the bottom ellipse, in that case one side of the opening leans towards you while the other leans away. Here, in this *Ellipse*, the opening occurs on the *major* axis and both sides of the opening appear parallel, which means that as you enter into the space of the sculpture, you're not entering into its torque. You immediately see and sense the entire volume and only after you have walked it do you notice its torque and rotation, which is very subtle, whereas in all the other *Ellipses* you are immediately pulled into their movement as soon as you enter.

DS Now we're in the third of the Dia pieces, *Double Torqued Ellipse I*.
RS The work came together so precisely during the bending process that we didn't have to flame-heat to perfect the curvature. The heat treatment leaves torch marks, diagonal lines on the surface, and the steel has to be sandblasted to obliterate the line scarring. If you didn't sandblast, the scarring would interfere with the reading of the rotation of the ellipse. Since we did not need to sandblast this piece the mill scale is still on, which accounts for its grey, leaden, heavy look. I prefer the mill scale to a sandblasted surface. The steel looks heavier, it reinforces the volume. When we shipped the Dia *Double* from L.A. to Bilbao, we wrapped the plates in order to protect the surface and to maintain the grey leaden colour. However, on the high seas, water spilled into the hold and onto the inside of the plates where the wrapping had ripped. That's why floods of oxidation cascade down its interior walls and give it a range of colours different from any other sculpture in the exhibition. The colour changes from ambers to oranges, to greys and blacks. I have never seen this combination of colours before, from vegetable marrow to burned wood to Fall mud. It's not the colour of painting, it's more like alchemy. The interior looks like it has been burnt. Usually I don't pay that much attention to the colour of the steel since I know that Cor-Ten oxidizes over a period of six or seven years, and during that time the surface colour changes continually. The steel slowly turns dark, dark brown, then dark amber, and finally almost blackens, and that's the colour that will remain when the surface seals itself. So I don't concern myself with the evolution of the process. It's just that I happen to like the particular state that this sculpture is in at this moment. It's totally subjective in that it relates to experiences I've had in the past, and brings up a host of metaphorical associations. The steel weathered in a way that makes the sculpture richer than it was before. That is not always the case. There were pieces at the Geffen which were so striated with different colour combinations that it distracted from the experience of their volume and their torque.
DS The character of the piece is now, for me, radically different from what it was at Dia. Because of the much hotter colour, the interior is much more earthy and less ethereal.

Richard Serra, *Double Torqued Ellipse I*, 1997, weatherproof steel, exterior ellipse 398 × 1020 × 824 cm., interior ellipse 398 × 790 × 637 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

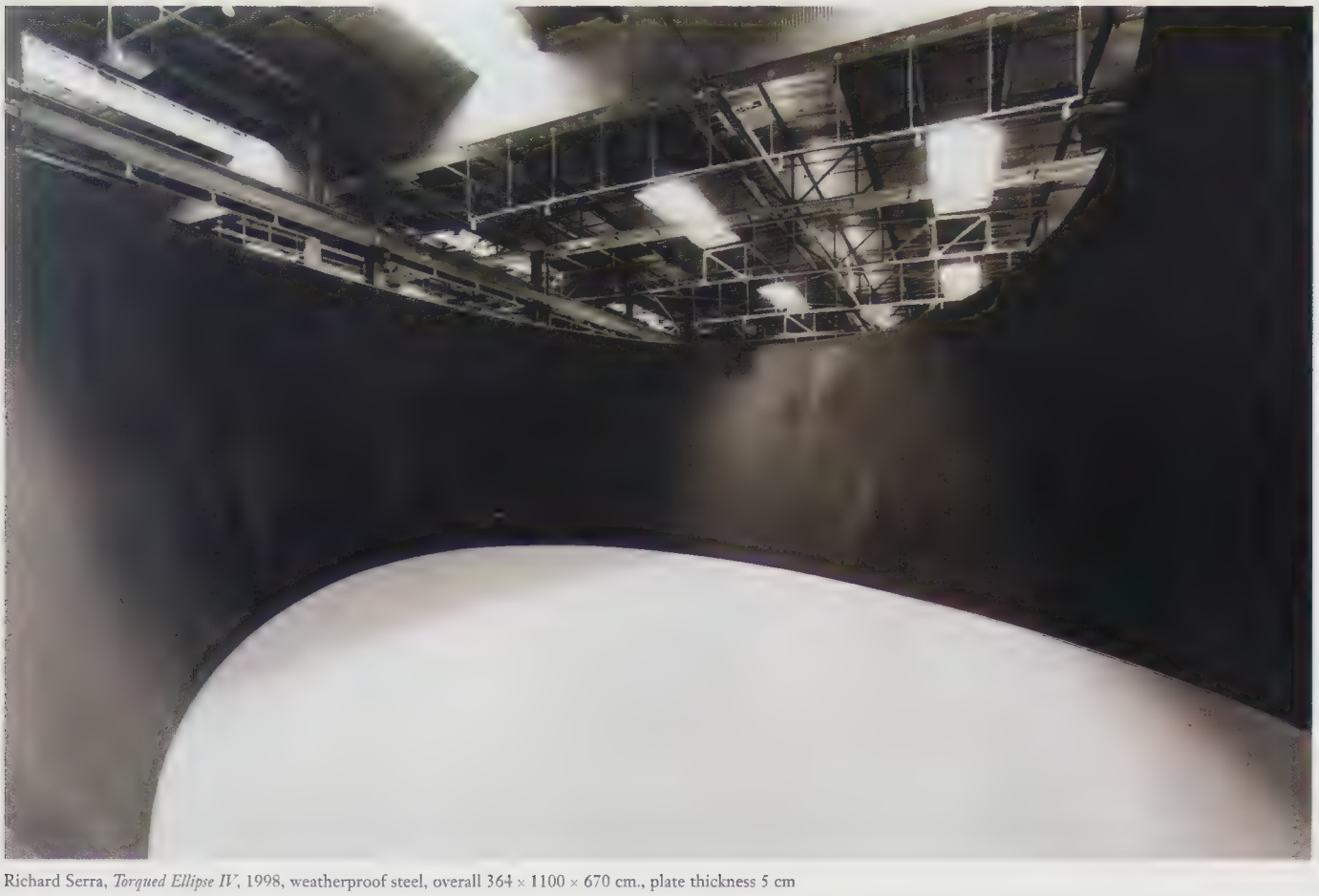
Torqued Ellipse II in the foundry



Richard Serra, *Double Torqued Ellipse II*, 1998, weatherproof steel, exterior ellipse 358 × 767 × 1164 cm., interior ellipse 358 × 605 × 885 cm., plate thickness 5.1 cm

RS I think that's right. And more grounded, and it allows for a bigger range of reactions. Not only do you experience its volume as moving and turning as you turn, but you also get involved with the particularities of the surface oxidation. This is, as I said, the only piece where I was concerned with its colour even though I know that it won't stay the way it is, that it's going to change again.
DS And the beauty of this is that it happened by chance, that it happened beyond your control?
RS Yes, it had nothing to do with me.
DS And you prefer it the way it is now?
RS I prefer it to the way it was before.
DS If you had not preferred it, would you have done anything with chemicals to change it?
RS No. There's a piece here, the very last piece I made, which hardly oxidized. After it was sandblasted it was immediately shipped from Germany to Bilbao and wasn't exposed to the weather for any length of time. It's yellow-orange now, a colour which puts me off, but there's nothing I'm going to do about it. It will change in time.

DS We're now in *Double Torqued Ellipse II* and it seems to me that this is the one of the three *Doubles* in which the drama goes on in the corridor rather than in the interior ring.
RS The corridor is extremely tight, it narrows to only 28 inches just before you enter the inner ellipse. You have to measure your steps and break stride. The counter-step tends to throw you off balance.
DS Given the precarious nature of the walk through the corridor, have you any preference as to whether people go round it clockwise or anti-clockwise?
RS The passage is equally narrow on both sides of the opening into the inner ellipse, so it shouldn't really matter whether one walks in one direction or the other. I feel that it is less destabilising to walk the passage clockwise. But that might just be my preference, although I think it's a natural impulse to walk to the right.
DS I'll go and try that later.
RS This *Double* is the most claustrophobic and the most psychological of all of them. It tends towards Surrealism in the sense of its heightened anticipation. It's lower and has a very tight stretch to it. It is more compressed but at the same time turns quicker, and its torque is faster than in all the other *Doubles*. It's the most unsettling and unknowable of the three *Doubles*. Walking through its corridor is irritating, it makes you feel uneasy, and entering the inner ellipse does not give you any relief. You're contained in a space that doesn't reveal itself readily, you still feel like you're caught up in the drama of how it is unfolding. You can't assimilate this *Double*. You never get rid of your vertigo. It's the most unstable.
DS Of the *Doubles* or of any of them?
RS I think of any of them. It's almost overly affective. It's



Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse IV*, 1998, weatherproof steel, overall 364 × 1100 × 670 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse V*, 1998. weatherproof steel, overall 411 × 845 × 969 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

geared to pricking you into reacting. It's the easiest piece from which to get an immediate charge. As a result the process of perception is not as protracted as it is in the other *Ellipses*. *Double Torqued Ellipse II* represents an extreme. After the first *Double*, I wanted to get to the boundaries of where I could go in the opposite direction. The *Double* that follows II is a rebound in that it is very static. Before I made the third *Double* I made *Torqued Ellipse V*, which is a big drum, because I was curious to see a large cylindrical static space. The second *Double*, in dictating how you move, is most like a Skinner box: cause and effect. But there are people who prefer this *Double* to all of the others, and it is definitely one of the works that I think about a lot.

DS I certainly agree with you that this is the most claustrophobic, the most impinging of the pieces – it really squeezes in on you – but I don't share your criticism of it as being excessively emotive, and also I don't agree that it's the most vertiginous; I'll tell you which I think is that when we get to it. But what I'd like to do is to break the chronological sequence and go to *Double Torqued Ellipse III*, because I think that the contrast is so telling. It does indeed look as if this third *Double* is a deliberate antithesis to the second.

RS The third *Double* is very static. It feels very archaic. It's very vertical: in fact, its content lies more in its verticality than in its torquing. When you're in this piece you almost sense that you're at the bottom of a shaft. It's quality is that of light moving upwards. If I had to name another artist whom it has any relationship to, it would be Barnett Newman. That might be presumptuous on my part, but I do think that this *Double* has a quality that I find in Newman's paintings in that its perception has to do with centering oneself in relation to a vertical entity. The space of its interior passage is very generous: it measures between three and five feet, and two people can walk through side by side very easily.

DS About its stability: when you walk round the corridor, there always seems to be space to spare, and you somehow know all the way that there are going to be no dramatic surprises which will change that.

RS There's more release in this piece. It's not about anticipation. You are more at ease in this piece.

DS Absolutely. 'At ease' is right.

RS This is the most generous of the pieces, I think.

DS It's the most serene of the pieces.

RS I have a great fondness for its space. I like to come back to it.

DS When we were talking before about *Torqued Ellipse II*, I was saying how its self-subsistence gives it an air of indifference to our presence. It sort of asserts itself against us, is like a *noli me tangere*, and makes us feel uneasy. This present piece also has an impressive self-subsistence, but it presents us with a very serene place to be in. It makes me feel very much at ease to be contained in it, as with a fifteenth-century Indian Muslim tomb.

RS Without being architecture, this sculpture relates to architectural containers I've been in, particularly in Greece, in Mycenae. It starts to call back something of Mycenae …

DS Do you mean the Treasury of Atreus, the Tomb of Agamemnon?

RS Not sure. I don't recall a specific tomb or place but once this piece was up I recognised an experience that I'd had in Greece, I don't mean classical, I mean ancient Greece.

DS Can you say anything about the proportions that explains the way the piece works?

RS Longitude and latitude differ only by approximately two feet, so the ellipse tends to read as more circular and the walls don't shift in and out as much as it rotates in elevation. You don't follow the rhythm of the plane as it bends around. The volume, the void, is the active driving force moving upward. The torque is almost ineffectual, the volume takes over and drives the weight of the piece upward. This piece has an incredible lift and vertical thrust to it. You immediately raise your head and look up when you walk in. The opening reinforces the notion of the upward movement in that the edges of the plate are almost vertical and parallel.

DS Now we're in *Torqued Ellipse IV*, the one that's going to the Museum of Modern Art. This is the most open of all the series, the most spread.

RS This *Ellipse* has the greatest difference between longitude and latitude, which gives it a tremendous torque. It's the most horizontal, and the most satisfying from both the inside and the outside. It has a bigger range of inflection than any of the other pieces and a more noticeable stretch. Its walls seem to be made of a malleable material, of something other than steel. Due to its large spread, its

Richard Serra, *Double Torqued Ellipse III*, 1998–9, weatherproof steel, exterior ellipse 434 1040 × 914 cm., interior ellipse 434 × 790 – 545 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

shape looks truncated. It is actually lower than any of the other pieces. You could compare the driving force that forms its skin to your fist pushing into a malleable surface and shaping it by the turn of your elbow. The feeling you get as you walk through it is that it's moving laterally away from you. Your perception is propelled by the movement of your hips, not by your trunk. Number *IV* has more athleticism to it than the other pieces.

DS It stretches you, it stretches your body. There are other *Ellipses* where an illusory movement of the walls is analogous to the movement of muscles in the body, but this one is unique in the way it creates a very definite pull in both directions, a stretching of your length.

RS Your gesture is different in this piece. You take larger strides as you walk its length.

DS Well, it has the quality of a stadium. It's as if it is open to the skies, and it gives you a great feeling of release. It's like being out of doors.

RS That's right.

DS And now we're in *Torqued Ellipse V*.

RS This piece was the first that was fabricated in Germany. It was made in relation to the very open and sinuous qualities of *Torqued Ellipse IV*, and it was followed by the very static Double *Torqued Ellipse III*.

DS I'll tell you what it's like for me, this piece: it's like a great barn. It has a sense of enormous size, but of a huge indoor space as against the feeling of a stadium in *Torqued Ellipse IV*.

RS This is a big container. It doesn't have the classical quality or the vertical thrust of the *Double* that followed it, even though it's very high. It has a boxy volume. It's the most volumetric of the series. But it doesn't have the nuances of the other pieces nor the richness of raw metaphors. It's very static and blocky.

DS Well, that's why I say it's like a barn, and that's what I like about it, that it's a *building*, not a piece of *architecture*. It has no pretensions, it's just a wonderfully large generous space.

RS This is the most flat-footed of all of them.

DS But that's its charm.

RS It's the least evocative in terms of metaphor. It's big, blocky, volumetric, and as you walk into it you are confronted by the substance of this almost cylindrical contained space. I like the substance of its volume, but I don't like its lack of potential for thinking about other things; it remains too static for me. The resolution of number *V* for me is the last *Double* where I used what I learned in this piece to make a space that would not only hold the volume but simultaneously create a vertical lift.

DS But I don't think you should underrate it, because, while the *Double* has more refinement, this has got a wonderful primitive generosity.

RS I think *V* works very well in the context of this installation. Since I had to group the pieces according to the substructure of this gallery, I had to overcome a hollow in the installation, because there is a section of the floor that does not have sufficient load-bearing capacity. I decided to place the biggest volume next to the area that had to be left empty, hoping that it would hold that space. In placing number *V*, I was mainly concerned with its relation to the architecture of the room as a container in a container.

DS We're now in the final piece here, *Torqued Ellipse VI*, and this is the piece that for me is easily the most vertiginous.

RS This is one of the three pieces in the series that I prefer, along with *Torqued Ellipse I* and *IV*. It's very different from *I* in that the torquing isn't the issue, the containment of the space is the issue. In that way it's comparable to *II*, although in *II* the opening is on an axis, whereas here it's on a tangent, but, since the rotated ellipse is very round, that hardly matters.

DS When we were talking about *Torqued Ellipse V*, you said something about feeling 'confronted' by the

substance of an almost cylindrical space. And when you used that expression I disagreed with you in my mind because I don't think the thing does confront you, I think it contains you. You do often get with these sculptures a feeling of confrontation with a sloping wall or a curved wall, but for me there's not a sense of confrontation either in Torqued *Ellipse V* or in *Torqued Ellipse VI*. There's a sense of containment, the thing is all around you, you're as aware of what's behind you as you are of what's in front of you.

RS *VI* doesn't have the generosity of the longitudinal openness of *VI*; on the other hand, it has a large moving volume, and it has a six-foot overhang. In the combination of torquing and volume it is more successful than any other single *Ellipse*. The particular rotation moves the volume upward and torques the field at the same time. This piece is like a bellows. You sense that the air inside is pushing the skin out and that the outside curvature is being driven by the torquing on the inside. It's the least diagrammatic. Within four feet you find that the piece has shifted from a shape that appears vertical and truncated to a shape that seems to be falling away and opening. This piece has the most satisfying external movement of any of the pieces for me other than number *IV*, and it has the most satisfying interior volume. Number *VI* comes closest to what I've been driving at in the singles.

David Sylvester has to thank, first, Richard Serra and Clara Weyergraf-Serra for the extensive work they did in clarifying and expanding his edited versions of the manuscripts; second, Naomi Sylvester, for invaluable help with his editing; third, Alan Glatter, the artist's chief assistant, and Ealan Wingate, of the Gagosian Gallery, for taking him to Beth Ship at Sparrow's Point, Maryland, to see the three first *Ellipses* shortly after their completion.

'Richard Serra: Sculpture 1995–1999', until 17 October, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao

Catalogue, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/Steidl Verlag, Gottingen, German, £25.

The first two interviews by David Sylvester, recorded in April and September 1997, were published in *Richard Serra: Sculpture 1985–98*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1998.

Inside a *Double Torqued Ellipse*

All photographs of the sculptures: Dirk Reinartz

Richard Serra, *Double Torqued Ellipse VI*, 1998–9, weatherproof steel, overall 418 × 1020 × 600 cm., plate thickness 5 cm

John Spurling

In My Own Way, Yes

The paintings and writings of Bridget Riley

In March 1907 Matisse showed his *Blue Nude* at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris and caused the usual outrage. Later the same year a young American called Walter Pach was looking at it in the Steins' apartment with the 26-year-old Picasso:

> 'Does that interest you?' asked Picasso.
> 'In a way, yes... it interests me like a blow between the eyes. I don't understand what he is thinking.'
> 'Neither do I', said Picasso.[1]

Sixty years later, in March 1967, the art critic David Sylvester asked Bridget Riley, in an interview published in *Studio International*:

DS Do you want your work to be aggressive towards the spectator? Do you like it to hurt your eyes?
BR I don't mind either way. But I remember being very surprised when people first complained that it hurt their eyes, because it has never hurt mine.
DS No?
BR No, never. Not *hurt* them.
DS Does it make them water?
BR No.
DS Doesn't it give you a pain?
BR No – no *pain*! It gives me pleasure.
[Reprinted in *The Eye's Mind. Bridget Riley: Collected Writings 1965–1999*, pp.73–4]

Not understanding what the artist is thinking has been a barrier between lookers and makers for at least two centuries. Joshua Reynolds, generously paying tribute in his fourteenth annual Royal Academy Discourse to Gainsborough's 'genius' soon after his death in 1788, still felt it necessary to warn students off imitating the old rival's idiosyncratic methods. Constable and Turner, Delacroix and Courbet all met with incomprehension even before Impressionism turned it almost into a rule of the game of exhibiting art. Bridget Riley has several times given her own view – naturally from the artist's side of the barrier – of the history of the hurting-eyes syndrome. In a BBC radio dialogue in 1992 with the artist Michael Craig-Martin she said:

> Painting is, I think, inevitably an archaic activity and one that depends on spiritual values. One of the big crises in painting – at least a century or two, or maybe even three centuries, old – was precipitated by the dropping away of the support of a known spiritual context in which a creative impulse such as painting could find a place. This cannot be replaced by private worlds and reveries. As a painter today you have to work without that essential platform.
> [Published in *Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art*, Zwemmer, 1995, p.63]

But Riley's own advance into creative incomprehensibility was initially an act of aggression, though aimed less at the public, which had scarcely seen her work, than at Maurice de Sausmarez, the friend and mentor who had just broken with her. Deciding to sign off being an artist altogether, she made one final, entirely black, painting which was also intended as a personal message to him: 'At that point in time I wanted to say: that *there were absolutes*, that one could not pretend that black was white' [*The Eye's Mind*, p.125]. However, dissatisfied with the result, she went on to paint *Kiss* (1961), the earliest work included in the Serpentine Gallery's recent retrospective of her 1960s and 1970s paintings. The all-black painting dissatisfied her

Bridget Riley, *Kiss*, 1961, acrylic on linen. 122 × 122 cm

because it did not express all the emotional energy she had invested in it, and her return from artistic suicide was based on her analysis of both the problem and its solution. As she told Isabel Carlisle in an interview at the front of the catalogue for last year's retrospective at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal:

> I realised there was no opposition within this black painting. So in the next painting I did I added white and put a straight line against a curve. Where they almost touch there is a tiny visual flash which suggested the title. From that time on I pitched my work on contrast.

It is an exemplary story, full of implications: not only the admission that in art if not in life absolutes are less fruitful than contrasts, but also the triumph of self-discipline over disorganised emotion and of the will to be an artist over the sense of art being a blind alley. Did the title, too, perhaps have an extra meaning: a sly recognisance to de Sausmarez for his crucial role as catalyst? And from *Kiss* flowed all her subsequent black and white paintings, her sudden and almost immediate success and, by another contrast, a further shift of understanding, all her later coloured paintings too. As for us, the lookers, the story helps us to cross the barrier and see how it appears from the other side, to understand not only Riley's own approach to making art but that of all her distinguished and misunderstood predecessors. None of them was trying to hurt anybody's eyes or, as Ruskin said of Whistler, to fling a pot of paint in the public's face, but simply to make a painted surface come to life in the best way they could.

Becoming famous overnight in 1965 for her contribution to 'The Responsive Eye' exhibition in New York, Riley was appalled by the 'explosion of commercialism, band-wagoning and hysterical sensationalism' which followed it. An article in *ArtNews* was headlined, 'You can hang it in the hall', and ended, 'And if it causes you a headache, you can hang it in the Pentagon'. Six months later Riley made a dignified reply under the title 'Perception is the Medium' in the same paper. Denying that she had studied 'optics', used more than 'rudimentary mathematics' or 'made any use of scientific theory or scientific data', she declared:

> The basis of my paintings is this: that in each of them a particular situation is stated. Certain elements within that situation remain constant. Others precipitate the destruction of themselves by themselves. Recurrently, as a result of the cyclic movement of repose, disturbance and repose, the original situation is re-stated. [*The Eye's Mind*, pp.66–8]

Two years later, however, when Sylvester was still having his eyes hurt by her black and white paintings, she was already coping with a new problem, requiring a completely new solution and, subsequently, explanation. As she told Michael Craig-Martin in 1992,

> The reasoning of my black and white work could not be extended into colour because it depended on a contradiction between stability and disruption. I had to find a new basis and for a long time this eluded me... I saw that the basis of colour is its instability. Instead of searching for a *firm* foundation, I realised I had one *in the very opposite*... What you focus upon is not what you see, at least not in terms of colour. I realised that what I was working with lay just outside the centre of attention. One looks *here* and colour is *there*. [*Dialogues on Art*, p.56]

But once again, having evolved a method of catching this elusive phenomenon by laying it out in various combinations in long vertical or horizontal bars, she was misunderstood. People saw the bars more than they saw the colours, and thought they were being provoked again with designs for deckchairs or dress-materials masquerading as fine art. Almost every subsequent development of her long struggle with colour has been received with the same wrong-way-round reaction, as if her use of curves rather than straight lines, then of straight lines again bearing intenser colours, then of diagonals, were merely changes of style within a deliberately and rather pusillanimously narrow area of expertise. The truth is that she continually pits her expertise against the risks of further exploration, and that there have been few more ambitious attempts this century to tackle the basic problem of painting. As she told Mel Gooding in a conversation recorded in 1988 for the catalogue of the South Bank Centre's exhibition 'The Experience of Painting',

> In the real world one generally identifies things, and colour is seen as related to them, as the colour of leaves, atmosphere, earth, water, skin, clothes, silk or satin, etc. But in painting colour is the one material through which everything is brought into existence; there is no other underpinning except the surface of the canvas. That's where the problem opens up. Colour activity is incomparably stronger in painting than in external reality. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.121]

Throughout her career, as the new book from which many of these quotations are taken reveals, Riley has constantly and patiently explained exactly what she has been trying to do. Her lectures, interviews and articles are as articulate and precise as her paintings, and she has also, since winning the International Prize for Painting at the 1968 Venice Biennale and touring Europe with her 1970–1 retrospective, become increasingly interested in the tradition of European painting. Some of this formidable dexterity with words and ideas as well as her intimacy with Old Masters must surely be due to her long friendship with the German art historian Robert Kudielka, whom she first met in 1967 and who has become her foremost interpreter. Editor of her collected writings, he also provides, in the catalogue to the Serpentine's recent exhibition, the clearest and most detailed account so far of how her work of the 1960s and 1970s was constructed, how it developed from one phase to another, and how it acts on the viewer. But instead of removing the mystery from these perennially mysterious paintings, such close exposition only shifts it to where it belongs, where Riley herself encounters it, well summarised by her former friend Maurice de Sausmarez in a conversation in 1967:

> The mystery of creation for you then is not so much in how you work, or the phases in the procedure, but in what is evoked out of the inter-play of those tight, straight-forward, physical elements that anyone can observe in your paintings. You yourself must experience a revelatory excitement in the emergence of this intense dynamism, the by-product as it were of your total frankness in the use of all that lies on the canvas.

To which she replied:

> It is the measure of the vitality of the medium – the answering back – in the creative dialogue. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.65]

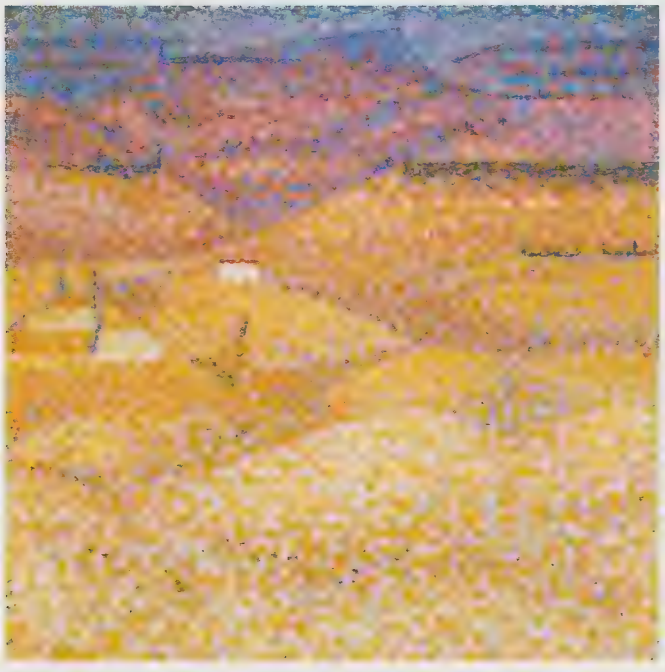
She has now been engaged in this creative dialogue over nearly 40 years of unrelenting and concentrated work. Anyone who has ever seen her in her studio, poring over innumerable snippets of painted paper, with gouache sketches on the walls and table, and the occasional interruption of an assistant bringing some match or mismatch to be accepted or rejected by the presiding eye's mind, will know what that means in practice. There is an amusing passage at the end of her 1992 radio dialogue with Bryan Robertson, when he blithely, perhaps provocatively, asks her:

> Do you ever enjoy any real true leisure, in the sense of actually spending time just doing anything you like?

Even in the printed version one can hear her bristle as she makes the artist's classic riposte:

> I don't quite know what you mean by leisure because within working, within the things I am doing, there is leisure, there is an ebb and flow, a rhythm which takes into account both the need for repose, and the need for activity. [*Dialogues on Art*, p.90]

She has at last, perhaps – in last year's exhibition at Kendal



Bridget Riley, *Pink Landscape*, 1960, oil on canvas, 101.5 × 101.5 cm

and this year's at the Serpentine – convinced the public that she is not messing about and not trying to hurt their eyes so much as to explore and share her own 'pleasures of sight', which she wonderfully describes, in the catalogue of her 1984 touring exhibition, 'Working in Colour', in terms reminiscent of one of her favourite books, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*:

> But whatever the occasion might be, the pleasures of sight have one characteristic in common – they take you by surprise. They are sudden, swift and unexpected. If one tries to prolong them, recapture them or bring them about wilfully their purity and freshness is lost. They are essentially enigmatic and elusive. One can stare at a landscape, for example, which a moment ago seemed vibrant and find it inert and dull – so one cannot say that this lively quality of sight is simply 'out there in nature', or easily available to be commanded as wished. Nor is it a state of mind which, once acquired, can bend the most stubborn and unrewarding aspect of external reality to its own purposes. It is neither the one nor the other but a perfect balance between the two, between the inner and the outer. This balance is a sort of convergence which releases a particular alchemy, momentarily turning the commonplace into the ravishing. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.32]

But even among those who have long accepted and loved her work, there remains some resistance to her increasing conviction that what she is doing belongs to the tradition of European art. Kudielka may have encouraged this conviction in the early 1970s, and her stint as a National Gallery Trustee in the 1980s reinforced it, but she was, after all, copying Seurat and painting her own divisionist landscapes (notably *Pink Landscape* in 1960) before she went black and white and abstract with *Kiss*. Earlier still, at Goldsmith's College in London, where she studied in 1949–52, she was mostly absorbed in Sam Rabin's life-drawing class ('for three years I drew day and night'). To this day, following Rabin's teaching, following Matisse '*la verticale est dans mon esprit*'), following Bouguereau (who taught Matisse to use the plumb-line), her first concern is to establish the vertical, since for her as for Matisse 'the plumb-line, which determines the vertical, forms with its opposite, the horizontal, the draughtsman's compass' and 'around this imaginary line evolves the arabesque'.[2] When, in 1989, she chose seven works from the National Gallery's collection for her exhibition in the occasional series 'The Artist's Eye', they were all large figure paintings: a Titian, a Veronese, an El Greco, a Rubens, two Poussins and a Cézanne. 'The artists whose work I have selected', she told Kudielka in a long conversation introducing the catalogue, 'have each used colour ... as an element of construction ... All of them ... have one thing in common: they were interested in what it means to *build* a painting in plastic terms'. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.142]

It is a fascinating and instructive conversation which makes clear, once again, that if people think Riley is trying to attach herself to the Masters or force their work into the grid of her own, they are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. She sees and expounds what these Masters have 'built' in a two-dimensional space because she herself has spent a lifetime building in the same space, starting from a very different standpoint – perhaps the diametrically opposite one – yet, at least in what she calls 'plastic terms', emerging into the same rarefied, vertiginous air, but without their traditional supports.

> Painters have always needed a sort of veil upon which they can focus their direct attention. It's as though the more fully the consciousness is absorbed, the greater the freedom of the spirit behind. In the tradition an important aspect of this veil was given by mythology and the Bible. If these spiritual perspectives are no longer available, the alternative is not plain realism. At the most, the painter may be led through the pursuit of his art, like Cézanne was, to 'realise' the veil of reality as such. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.173]

What she gives us, in other words, is neither an art historian's nor a conservationist's nor a moralist's nor even a plain intelligent art-lover's point of view, but specifically a painter's.

Yet this is not quite the whole story. Her relationship to modernism is more engaged, more polemical. Recalling no doubt her own unhappy first encounter with stardom in 1965, she wrote, in an article for *The Illustrated London News* in 1983:

> I think it very probable that in the future there may be a divergence of paths [in the visual arts]: one tendency will come more and more to resemble the world of pop music, with group following group or movement following movement, supported by a vast promotional structure. Simultaneously, genuine development will tend to go underground. Thus the Western World will produce an inversion of the effect of totalitarianism, with commercialism replacing party ideology as the dominant factor ... the innovations of the second half of the nineteenth century and of the first half of our own have not yet been fully developed and still carry the seeds for the future. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.141]

Monet, Cézanne, Seurat, Matisse, Mondrian, Pollock: these are the modernists she refers to most often in her writings, though never, since her student days, through imitation in her own work. As with the Old Masters she responds to them sharply and analytically, emerging backwards as it were from her own experience of grappling first with the contrasts and disturbances of black and white forms, then

Bridget Riley, *Encounter*, 1993, oil on linen, 170.2 × 221.2 cm

Bridget Riley: *Arrest 2*, 1965, acrylic on linen, 195 × 190 cm. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

with the endemic instability of colour, and most recently with the 'plasticity' or spatial potential of colour. Of Pollock, whom she found 'shattering' when she first saw his work at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1958, she said twenty years later in conversation with Kudielka: 'The unexpected thing in his free structure is the immense control, whereas the unexpected thing in my controlled structure is the free play of visual forces' [*The Eye's Mind*, p.99]. Mondrian, whose exhibition at the Tate she co-curated in 1997, was described by her in a conversation with Kudielka in 1990 as

> a kind of Giotto in Abstraction in that he took Abstract art beyond any naïve state of icon-making, giving it plastic values and relationships which can only be compared in their potential to those which Giotto introduced into figurative painting. [*The Eye's Mind*, p.114]

For Monet', she wrote in an article in *Modern Painters* in 1992, 'perception was the essential vehicle and supreme arbitrator of his art. He accepted its complexities unhesitatingly, even without reflection, and went along with them', whereas 'for Seurat's purpose perception itself had to be examined, methodically objectified and built up into a technique' [*The Eye's Mind*, p.180]. As for Cézanne, whose *Les Grandes Baigneuses* she chose for her National Gallery show, marvelling in conversation with Kudielka at the way his figures 'seem to be built up out of the sensations nature provides', at his 'unity of colour' and the 'labyrinth of relationships' which creates it, she came as near to encountering him ('*Bonjour, M. Cézanne*') from the far side of abstraction in her own diagonally-organised, labyrinthine work of the late 1980s and early 1990s as she had come to any predecessor since her pre-abstract, Seurat-style *Pink Landscape* in 1960.

But if there is one artist she may hope to meet in heaven, as Gainsborough hoped to meet Van Dyck, it is probably Matisse who, she told Mel Gooding in 1988, 'has practised a far more abstract use of colour – particularly in his Fauvist work and his late paper cut-outs – than any of the radical abstract formalists' [*The Eye's Mind*, p.132].

Bridget Riley, *August 9: Revision of July 30*, 1997–8, gouache on paper, 70 × 72.5 cm

Riley's latest work, still only in the form of gouache studies and cartoons and not yet developed into full-scale oil paintings, carries a distinct tang of Matisse, even though it is built, as surely no Matisse ever was, over a grid of intersecting circles. The fresh, warm and cool colours – green, blue and yellow, amply spaced with white and black or deepened and flushed with purple or magenta – float over and under each other in crisp, curvaceous patches, leaf- or scimitar-shaped, flame-like, tendril-like, seaweed-like, with a sense of gentle up-and-down, but also diagonal, movement. 'What one means perhaps by "natural" colours', she told Kudielka in 1978,

> 'is what has been achieved by Matisse. His paintings always show an awareness of colour totality. But each colour maintains its own characteristics – being sustained, and not submerged, by others.'
> 'Is that your intention, too, now?'
> 'In my own way, yes.' [*The Eye's Mind*, p.103–4]

If she is right that we are coming to a divergence – or perhaps have already passed it – between overt 'promotional' art and 'genuine development ... underground', then we can be fairly sure that our old test – the shocking, eye-hurting one – for what is really innovative will no longer be valid. Shocking the punters, after all, is the technique they have all picked up by now – artists, promoters, museum officials – as the quickest way to instant fame and fashion-ableness. We have come full circle, to the point where the abstract eye-hurter of 1967 meets the figurative 'blow between the eyes' man of 1907 and both prove to have been sheer painters all along. Genuinely developing the tradition of painting is not, never was, an easy option for the artist, nor are those who may achieve it easily spotted even by the serious art-lover, since they will tend like Riley to emerge from unexpected directions. But the omens are good, if only because all-embracing commercialism is likely to induce – at least in the minority of braver spirits – a craving for the elusive, intimate, inimitable satisfactions of art, just as Soviet totalitarianism did. 'If Mondrian was the Giotto of Abstract Painting', Riley encourages us, 'the High Renaissance is still to come.'

1
Walter Pach, *Queer Thing Painting: Forty Years in the World of Art*, New York, 1938, quoted in Hilary Spurling's *The Unknown Matisse*, Hamish Hamilton, 1998.
2
Henri Matisse: Ecrits et propos sur l'art, ed. Dominique Fourcade, Hermann, Paris, 1972.

The Eye's Mind. Bridget Riley: Collected Writings 1965–1999, edited by Robert Kudielka, Thames & Hudson in association with the Serpentine Gallery and De Montfort University, 1999, £16.95.

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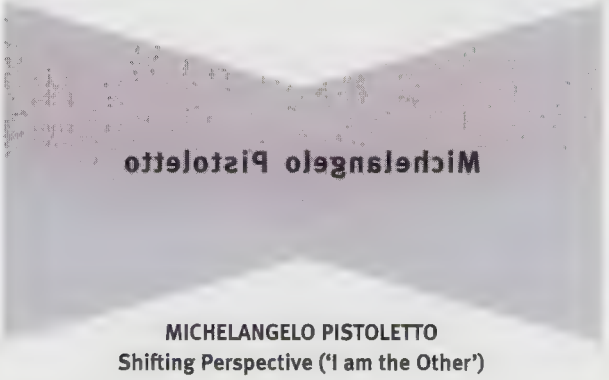

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George Szirtes

Ana Maria Pacheco at the National Gallery

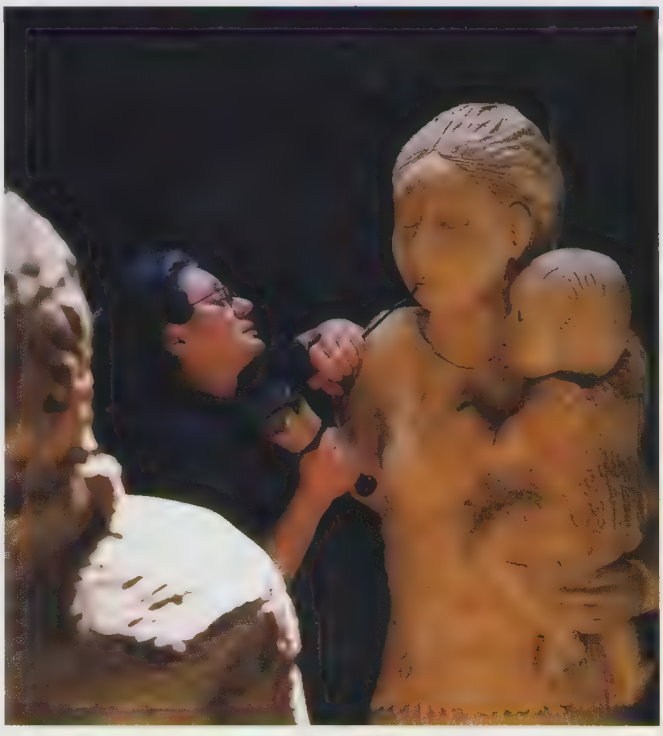
Human Nails

Ana Maria Pacheco, who is currently ending her residence at the National Gallery with a spectacular show of sculpture and painting, is an artist too large and strange to be accommodated in a grab-bag show assembled under an easily identifiable heading. She is neither an ironist nor a postmodern icon-maker; she does not deal with *Zeitgeist* or with pop culture; she is not a party animal nor is she of any particular party. She is perfectly disdainful of cool. She will not be joked away. Although she is highly sophisticated in her understanding of contemporary theory, her works refer to literary not theoretical texts. They spring out of a religious and cultural tradition we only recognise at one remove, a tradition with which many people (the ironic, *Zeitgeisty*, party animals who determine our visual culture) are highly uncomfortable. But it is not so much the tradition as the sensibility that makes her uniquely capable of assembling the debris of Judaeo-Christian iconography, infusing it with what to us are alien or oddly angular traditions, and turning it into artefacts that, for all their exotic qualities, may be read straight.

This straightness is hard and uncomfortable for us precisely because we arrive at it down circuitous, half-familiar routes. Like all real art, Pacheco's has to be new: it has to negotiate its position in visual language; it must retain the power to disturb and defamiliarise. In this respect her work is best compared not to that of other contemporary sculptors and painters, but to mavericks such as Bill Viola or Joseph Beuys who are situated in a mystical territory impinging on Christian iconography but referring less directly to its substance. The key to this aspect of Pacheco's work is materiality, albeit materiality of a particularly magical and paradoxical kind.

Pacheco was born in central Brazil. Her own family was half Catholic, half Protestant, and she grew up in a hybrid culture of carnivals, religious processions and Baroque churches. This is the natural breeding-ground of what we have come to know as Magic Realism. In her youth she responded to the contrasts between raw and cultivated landscape, between rich and poor, and to the dramatic tension of statues of prophets and sculptural groups by the great eighteenth-century Brazilian sculptor Antonio Francisco Lisboa, known as O Aleijadinho, 'the little cripple'. Their language, half Baroque emotion, half Gothic refinement, developed out of the sensuous realism of anonymous polychrome sculptures which showed the effect of weals and stigmata, and used real jewels, hair and rope, blurring the boundaries between realism, fetish and art. Pacheco's use of glass and stones for eyes, and small scale dentures for teeth in wooden figures, refers both to them and to African masks, and does so to disturbing effect. Her spiritual landscape is a no-man's land of the real, the illusionistic and the formal. This use of the real serves to defamiliarise and resituate us, not through a knowing surrealist *dérèglement de tous les sens* but rather by way of the deep-seated and half-familiar memory of human suffering and religious ecstasy.

Anonymous, Untitled, polychromed wood



Ana Maria Pacheco at work in her studio, 1999

The Brazil where Pacheco grew up was highly conscious of its own distance from the European centre. It was aware of itself as a colonial culture and a rather indeterminate one at that, for despite the ostensible success of catholicism and the imposition of Portuguese values, the cultural language it forged employed the sensibility of those who had lived there before colonialisation as well as those who were brought in as slaves. Folk religions persisted and still do persist. There were many mixed marriages, so much so that a fifth of Brazil's population is the product of them. It was a composite sensibility, and as such, brittle. Its art education looked all the harder to the modernisms of Europe in order to secure it membership of the club of supposed advanced nations who represented stability and progress. Pacheco, whose first training was as a concert

pianist, was as aware of these modernist pressures as she was of the oppressive political climate. In 1964 – well within her memory – the military had overthrown the government. Brazil was to remain under military rule until 1985. The cruelties of the regime, the cruelties of colonialism, the cruelties of an often violent society cast and continue to cast a consistent shadow over all her work.

In 1973 Pacheco took the opportunity of a scholarship to the Slade and she has remained here ever since. England was a good half-way house between Brazil and the Europe that Brazil looked to for validation. As a Brazilian, and as a woman, Pacheco stood at a curious angle to developments here (the movement from Pop Art to Conceptualism etc). Her early work in printmaking shows a keen political consciousness but is far from mere political commentary. Works of the mid-80s such as *Acrobats* (1983), *Box of Heads* (1984) and *The Banquet* (1985) can clearly be read as essays on tyranny, but it is not at all certain that the tyranny is located in Brazil. Time and the artistic process of distillation have not removed it to a safe distance. The kind of tyranny depicted in *The Banquet* has a psychological depth that resists too precise a location. It is not so generalised as to become a sententious sermon about the evil that lurks within us all. Those tiny teeth and glittering eyes have all the intensity of a specific event, but the event cannot be specifically distanced and therefore digested and ignored. It sticks in the throat like a live thing. We *feel* it is political – in what other sphere would people exercise such authority over each other? – but are aware that it has extended the meaning of the term into areas that will not obey a crude 'personal is political' formulation. Its proper sphere is the psychological-institutional. Those eyes, teeth and tiny baby hands do not let us go. In so far as the political image remains available, the work may be classified as satire, somewhere down the line from Grosz, Scarfe and Searle. But for Pacheco this is not, nor has it ever been, the only game in town.

Even on the political level other forms of engagement are involved. Pacheco's paintings, especially the series of mid-90s she has called *In Illo Tempore*, deal with sexual politics and sexual power. Threatened but potent female figures conspire, blow red smoke, ride wild animals, balance on high wires, float, strut and consort with beasts. Carnival and voodoo, Goya and Angela Carter, the figures do not preach but act their parts in a pageant which hints at, but does not offer, a simple feminist reading. They point instead to fringe religions, to rituals dreamt rather than known. Their assertions are magical and savage, much as Max Beckmann's or the best of Paula Rego's are. They might well sing the praises of female potency and offer a critique of maleness but they offer no panaceas. They emerge from the folds of the priest's gown, much like the little demons in Flemish work, who dance their way out of the bedclothes or the curtain. They convince by ghosting their way through shadow ideologies. Their very texture belongs to a shadowy hinterland; the paintings are large, smooth as glass, suggesting space and texture but denying it to the touch. Their evasive, paradoxical materiality lies elsewhere,

at the edge of religious ecstasy. This is part of their subversiveness.

Above all, I believe, it was the two monumental sculptural groups, *Man and His Sheep* (1989) and *The Longest Journey* (1994) that led her to the National Gallery despite her off-centre, marginalised status. For the National Gallery it was a courageous act, particularly in view of the fact that Pacheco is first and foremost a sculptor. Perhaps, as Kathy Adler says in her essay in the catalogue to the exhibition, it was precisely because Pacheco was where she was and who she was. In bad times the margin is by far the most interesting, and genuinely risky, place to be. Calling in the margins can revitalise the centre.

The margin runs risks simply in occupying the centre. The Western tradition is extraordinarily potent, even in the process of turning into postcards of itself. We need not know the precise subjects – indeed changes in education have guaranteed that the knowledge is almost lost – to feel the familiarity of the language. We recognise the gestures and poses, and respond to them with a certain irony. *Contrapposto* is a sort of camp joke that everyone

Ana Maria Pacheco, *The Banquet*, 1985, polychromed wood, 183 × 400 × 250 cm. Courtesy Pratt Contemporary Art

Ana Maria Pacheco, *Mau and his Sheep*, 1989, polychromed wood, 200 × 450 × 400 cm. Courtesy Pratt Contemporary Art

Ana Maria Pacheco. *Luz Eterna*. 1999. oil on gesso, three framed panels, each 278 × 201 cm. Courtesy National Gallery, London

recognises: Perugino's St Sebastian is a comic gesture with a college scarf for a loincloth. Delacroix's swooning maidens in *The Death of Sardanapalus* make us think as much of Margaret Dumont in *A Night at the Opera* as of Titian's Lucrezia (who she?). We have retained the language but lost the text: the result is classic postmodern insubstantiality. It makes life that much harder when you attempt to bring substantial experience into the equation.

Andrew Brighton's 1993 essay on Pacheco pays particular attention to her treatment of the body, remarking on the figures' 'over-large heads ... rounded shoulders and thick legs ... some of the characteristics of babies' and children's bodies'. He notes their poses, their sniggers, their hands over their mouths, their occasional malevolence and general childlike behaviour, and how these contain the seeds of adult sexuality. He talks about the 'iconographic idiolect' that characterises the works' presence. This is all certainly true, but there is more to be said on the use of the body in her work, for it is much more than childlike: it carries an almost Egyptian or archaic Greek tendency to frontality. Though the figures are to be seen in the round, they are rarely found in *contrapposto* twisting poses. Their frontality clings to them, making them both vulnerable and confrontational. Their heavy heads press their sharp little feet into the earth. It's as if they were human nails. Their centre of gravity is low: they are not made for free movement. In this sense they deny their Baroque ancestry: what they give with one hand they take with the other. Their power, their numinosity, resides in their unwillingness to surrender themselves to the viewer.

One of the most important elements of meaning in Western composition is the formal group. Here the apparently insignificant – drapery, body height, the positioning of limbs – apparatus that is difficult to pin down in iconographic terms, establishes rhythm and mood, a matrix within which more pointedly significant detail is located. I think of Giotto's *Mourning Over the Dead Christ* or Poussin's *Bacchanal before a Term of Pan*. Such highly articulate groups – the essence of humanism – are missing from Pacheco's earlier work. When a group is presented, it is as a huddled mass, the kind we see in Goya's black paintings, a seething human pulp signifying either menace or fear. These feelings form the ground bass of all Pacheco's work: it is from them that the hieratic figures rise. The viewer's encounter is with single figures, gods of survival.

That which seemed exotic and jagged at a distance may sometimes be rubbed into more comfortable, familiar shapes by close association. Familiarity breeds contempt. But we are now living in a world where most young people don't know the difference between five minutes ago and 500 years ago. The scale of this loss – the loss of the text I referred to above – may not be fully apparent yet, but it is tragic. Pacheco's residence at the National Gallery has been an opportunity to restore this loss – to bring the texts back into circulation and, as Adler suggests, to rediscover their own strangeness and jaggedness. Colin Wiggins's commentary in the exhibition catalogue details some of the references and reworkings, not only from the National Gallery but from the corpus of Western art. And beyond this to the world of documentary photograph and feature film. Here worlds either collide or inform each other and pass on.

As they do in the paintings. There are two large works. The first is *Luz Eterna*, or Eternal Light, a triptych based on the Temptation of St Anthony. The texts here are complex and multi-layered. There is Flaubert, of course, and Bosch, and Titian. But there is also barbed wire, a bombed city, balcony railings from the inner courtyard of the National Gallery itself, along with the image of a closed circuit television camera. The combination of such elements is not new in Pacheco. She is an artist who has constantly carried

her images through prints, drawings, paintings and three dimensional work, watching them develop, combine and recombine. The chopper helicopters buzzing the terrified mound of figures below have been seen before, but here they are even more like flies or locusts. The two sphinxes debating over the body of St Anthony on the right-hand panel are also old friends. The elements are like leitmotifs in Pacheco. One fully expects them to surface again in other forms. What is new is the sense of depth, the notion of a described and finite landscape, and, along with this, the breaking up of the mass into a series of individuals. The sixteen heads menaced by the 'copters belong to sixteen histories. Even more noticeably, the central characters – the two supporters of the naked figure in the left panel, the naked figure himself and the two sphinxes in the right panel – are identifiable types. The lovelier and possibly more benevolent of the sphinxes is something of a disco-queen, dressed to kill. Her partner, like an old procuress in Dutch and Flemish brothel scenes, approximates more to the older Pacheco model, which worked through a form of expressive anatomical shorthand. It is the language of humanism, even more than its texts, that matters.

This is still more strikingly the case in the other painting, *King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Garden of Earthly Delights*. Here we have a *hortus conclusus*. The central fountain reminds us of Van Eyck but instead of four springs there are six, symbolising the Star of David. Space is firmly defined by the hedge in the background. The garden is rich in leaves, beasts and flowers. Here are daffodils, roses, forget-me-nots, lilies-of-the-valley and irises, recalling the Song of Solomon; but there is also a porcupine, a peacock, a gazelle, a parrot, a hoopoe, an ape and a pair of turtle doves. To chase up all the literary and art historical references here would be a long task. That is a function of iconography, the textual side. There are apocryphal stories, Gerard de Nerval, even my own collaboration with Pacheco on a Bestiary which introduced the hoopoe, which then... and so on. But the language is even more fascinating, even edgier. Solomon is a handsome Spanish type, his long hair tied back in a bow, his face smeared with designer stubble, and the Queen of Sheba is black. She wears a diaphanous gown and is richly jewelled. Like the sphinx in *Luz Eterna* she has a kind of popular glamour. The nature of the transaction is mystical but the wisdom relates, as often in Pacheco, to sexual power. This is borne out in the predella which refers to the Queen of Sheba's relationship to the stupid lustful king who ruled the other half of her territory. Like Judith, she offers herself to him, then, again like Judith, she cuts off his head. The hoopoe in the third panel carries a message from Solomon, which leads to the celebrated meeting. The language of the predella links us to earlier Pacheco works, the space, the definition, the anatomical shorthand moving in the carnivalesque territory she has made her own. The main painting however has entered a compact with Pisanello and Van Eyck, as well as with Ribera and contemporary presences, and has made each element that much more articulate.

Narrative and theatre are central to Pacheco. If the text of Western religious art is to be revived it can only be through the defamiliarising of the language, by a reawakening of all that is numinous, barbaric and exotic at its heart. The margins with their unknown darknesses are probably the only *loci* capable of throwing new shadow over the centre. The major work of Pacheco's residence returns us, resoundingly and convincingly, to sculpture. Yes, it is carved sculpture; yes, it is figurative; yes, it has its roots in the deep narratives of Catholic Christianity and, very much yes, it rounds on us as high art and high craft. So high that it employs nineteen over life-sized figures, at the centre of which is a kneeling figure of St Sebastian with a sack on his head, tied to a post. The figure, as Wiggins points out, is informed by Mapplethorpe's photographs and a documentary photograph, that of a garrotted corpse, the victim of a death squad in Brazil. The title of the whole, *Dark Night of the Soul*, has been with Pacheco some time, as has the figure of the hooded man and the arrows, the mothers and children and the huddled menacing figures. They have all appeared in earlier works. The work is presented – and displayed – like a *coup de théâtre*, much as baroque sculpture was. We wander among these giants, meet each figure, and become overawed members of their society. The questions asked by Pacheco are not dissimilar from those asked by O Aleijadinho, or indeed other artists of the baroque. For us, they are difficult, almost embarrassing questions. The very title challenges our horrible British puritan sense of irony, of which the Chapman Brothers present a safe ironical reflection.

Enough of safety and irony. The contemporary British establishment, pop-, youth-, cash- and sensation-orientated know too little of this level of text. It has not experienced it, it has no historical soil in which to ground it. It can only respond with an embarrassed mock-sophisticated giggle and pretend to live on the cutting edge of a culture so blunted it couldn't cut through semolina. As long as the party goes on, that is all that matters. But somewhere beyond the party, life itself goes on. Men and women live through dramatic, sometimes tragic, narratives. The text remains available – only just. *Dark Night of the Soul* calls forth that text and presents it in a language that retains its jaggedness and shadows. Does that make it great art? Does that question have any meaning? I think the answer is yes, and yes.

Ana Maria Pacheco. *King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Garden of Earthly Delights*. 1999. oil on gesso. 2[illegible] 210 cm. Courtesy National Gallery, London

Ana Maria Pacheco at the National Gallery', 29 September–9 January 2000, National Gallery, London; January–April 2000, Wolverhampton City Art Gallery; April–June 2000, Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea; July–October 2000, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; October 2000–January 2001, Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield. Supported by The Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation, The Henry Moore Foundation and The Elephant Trust. Catalogue £9.95.

Ana Maria Pacheco, from *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1999, one of 19 figures, polychromed wood, 165 × 91.5 × 86.5 cm. Courtesy National Gallery, London

Martin Gayford

El Greco

The protean artistic identity of Domenikos Theotokopoulos

Walking east from Piazza San Marco, after a few minutes one crosses a canal on which there is a *campanile* leaning at an extraordinary angle – a leaning tower of Venice. This is San Giorgio dei Greci – a reminder of what a cosmopolitan place Venice once was. A great port and imperial capital, this was the city with the original Jewish ghetto – a sign not of persecution, but, for the time, of unusual tolerance.

There one can find beautiful Veneto-Judaic synagogues, including one magnificent baroque building perhaps designed by Longhena. Similarly, there was a Greek community and a Greek church, where one can still attend an Orthodox service. It was in San Giorgio, possibly, that once for a time worshipped Domenikos Theotokopoulos – known in Spain, where his countrymen were less numerous, simply as El Greco, the Greek.

This spring and summer a large El Greco exhibition, 'Identity and Transformation', has slowly been passing across the South of Europe, starting at the Museo Thyssen Bornemisza in Madrid, moving on to Rome, and ending up this autumn in Athens. It might seem rather perverse, then, to go looking for El Greco in Venice, the one major place in his life which is not included in this itinerary (assuming Madrid was standing in for Toledo, and Athens for Crete, where he was born and spent his early manhood).

But El Greco, as is narrated in the catalogue, has been claimed by more places and periods than perhaps any other artist in history. At various times, and often with great vehemence, he has been described as a quintessentially Byzantine painter – the soul of defeated Constantinople transported to the centre of Spain – and as the most Spanish of Spaniards, the one who best expressed the mystic soul of Castille. A striking photograph from 1934 shows a cavalcade of Spanish professors and students, mounted on donkeys, on a journey of homage to Fodele, the village in Crete then thought, wrongly, to be El Greco's birthplace. They went all that way, of course, not because they thought El Greco had been a great Greek, but because he was a great Spaniard.

Less nationalistically, but equally dogmatically, El Greco has been claimed as a pure exponent of Italian Mannerismo, indeed, as the most important of late mannerists. Also, at one time or another he has been hailed as the perfect modernist – predecessor of Cézanne and Picasso – and as that least modernist of beings, an ultra-Catholic mystic.

The truth of all this, a truth we are better able to appreciate these days, is that Domenikos Theotokopoulos was an extraordinary example of eclectic, cross-cultural migration. During his life he moved from artistic tradition to artistic tradition, from language to language, from religion to religion – he cannot have attended San Giorgio dei Greci long, if at all – with, as far as one can tell from the surviving records, a highly developed sense of his own rectitude at all times.

His was a very odd career, both when he was alive, and posthumously. For one thing, he was an extremely late starter, not really getting into his stride until he was in his late thirties, at the age that Raphael, for example, had died. But once he had gained momentum after he settled in Spain, he dominated the artistic life of Toledo in an extraordinary way, producing a vast quantity of pictures, including many of the finest then being produced in Europe in the rather thin last decades of the sixteenth century. However, even at the time of his death (in his early seventies) in 1614 he was going out of fashion. For the next two and a half centuries he was considered a bizarre curiosity of art history, when he was remembered at all. His reputation rose with the fashion for things Spanish in the mid-nineteenth century, and in the early decades of Modernism he had become one of the great names of art. The comparison between El Greco and Cézanne was frequently made, and the influence he exercised on the young Picasso was absolutely clear.

It is not, however, quite as obvious how far it went. It is evident enough in the sickly complexions and attenuated figures of the Blue Period, but I wonder whether it went much further than that. In New York one day, coming straight from the Met to MOMA, I happened to find myself standing in front of El Greco's *Opening of the Fifth Seal* and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. And, viewed almost side by side like that, they look like much the same kind of picture. The resemblances lie not in the handling of the figures – as they do with Picasso's Blue Period, but in the handling of space. There is the same construction of the painting out of jagged, fractured planes, the same sense that those planes are pushing the figures out towards the viewer, as though they were backed by something like a quilted mattress.

My *aperçu*, it turned out, was not new, but had been proposed before, independently by John Richardson and Ralf Laessoe – which is both peeving and encouraging. So it is not only in *my* imagination, then, that the billowing clouds, the stiff crumpled draperies of El Greco echo the jagged planes of Cubism. The connection is just as close with the *Martyrdom of Maurice and the Theban Legions*, intended for the monastery-palace of El Escorial, a huge and weird painting on exhibition in the Madrid edition of the show. This was, in a negative sort of way, one of the turning points of El Greco's career. With it, he had hoped to win the support and patronage of Philip II, the most

El Greco, *The Annunciation*, *c.*1597, oil on canvas, 114 × 67 cm

El Greco, *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580–2, oil on canvas, 448 × 301 cm

powerful man and munificent patron in the late sixteenth-century world. In fact, Philip rejected the picture, apparently because it relegated the actual martyrdom to a footnote, a vignette on the right. The bulk of the picture is given over to an elegantly posturing conference between the Saint and his followers, all so insouciantly weightless that they seem to be levitating just above the ground in their skin-tight blue and yellow armour.

It is a weird painting. It can be seen as the quintessence of Italian *manierismo*. And in fact it was the mannerist habit of sacrificing the devotional point of the picture to visual refinement – making the real subject an excuse for picture-making – that wrecked El Greco's plans. Philip II was an avid collector of Titians, but also the secular arm of the counter-reformation. But there are other aspects of the picture just a little more extreme than the extremest of Italian mannerists. For example, that harsh jaggedness of texture is un-Italian, as is the sky that seems to have turned into a solid substance from which a shaft of light comes down like a metal plate, and the way that there is no sense of spatial recession in the picture. Also, some figures are smaller than others but they don't really seem further away; the servant in the centre of the main group is half their size, grotesquely out of scale when one notices it.

Other El Grecos can put one in mind of yet more recent, less obviously connected artists. His way of presenting figures as a series of disjointed anatomical fragments – as if he did not sense the body beneath the intervening drapery – can make a painting such as the wonderful late *Purification of the Temple* seem a little like those other jig-saws of *disjectae membrae* painted by de Kooning in the late '40s (*Excavation*, for example).

The great *Annunciation* in the Prado could be read as a forbear of Jackson Pollock's *The Deep* (Pollock being, of course, a keen El Greco fan). But the Pollock consists of a flat plane broken by a void. The El Greco consists of a more or less flat plane of mingled cloud, cherubim, music-making angels, Gabriel and Madonna, into which a fissure of golden holy light is breaking, with the Holy Ghost on its beam. One is profoundly optimistic, one deeply despairing, but the basic structure is oddly similar.

There are other moments, however, when Theotokopoulos seems to look back, not forward. His *St John* in the Prado is the curly-headed fop of the Byzantine tradition, translated into terms of Venetian oil-painting.

But how did an expatriate Cretan, living in central Spain, come to anticipate cubist space, even abstract expressionist space, by 300 years (if he really did)? And, come to that, how did he manage to appear simultaneously, though generally to different eyes, entirely Hispanic, Byzantine and Italianate?

It would be as mistaken to claim him for Venice as for Toledo or Crete, but it was in Venice that his first and most extraordinary metamorphosis seems to have occurred. Some at least of the clues to the mystery of El Greco are to be found there. Domenikos Theotokopoulos was born a citizen of the Venetian Empire, apparently at Candia (modern-day Heraklion) in 1541. At that stage, Crete had been under the not particularly benign – in fact highly exploitative – control of Venice since the early thirteenth century.

But after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Crete, even under this imperfect rule, became the major surviving outpost of Byzantine culture. There were numerous refugees from the areas under Muslim control. It was in Crete that the greatest work of Greek Renaissance literature, the *Erotokritos*, was written. The country churches of Crete are filled with Byzantine frescoes, often executed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Similarly, the Orthodox monasteries are filled with icons, many showing a slight Western influence, the best of them by Georgios Klontzas and Michael Damaskinos.

We know nothing about El Greco's background or education, but he seems to have started off as a colleague of these men. In 1565, the 25-year-old Domenikos Theotokopoulos is mentioned in a document as a 'master painter', the son of 'Jorghi', brother of Manoussos. On 27 December, a painting of his, a Passion of Christ on a gold background, was assessed by two painters, one of whom was Georgios Klontzas. It seems clear that at that stage Theotokopoulos must have been painting much like Klontzas – that is in a Byzantine style very mildly Italianised.

One of the first paintings in the current show is a triptych by Klontzas, a Last Judgement with stately rows of the elect standing on neat horizontal bars of cloud, against a burnished gold sky in which – a little Italian touch – winged heads of cherubs are to be seen. As in all Byzantine painting, the space is spiritual; all the figures, though not necessarily equal in size or importance, are in the same frontal zone. In place of depth, there is a vertical hierarchy, the figures arranged from bottom to top.

Like Californian painters drifting to New York, or a French West Indian such as Pissarro migrating to Paris, these provincial Cretan painters gravitated to Venice. Klontzas and Damaskinos both spent a period in the city. So did Theotokopoulos, who is mentioned in a document dated 18 August 1568. The difference was in the effect Venice had on these three men. Klontzas was hardly touched; Damaskinos moved, as Jonathan Brown puts it, from being a thirteenth-century Byzantine painter to being a thirteenth-century Italian one; Theotokopoulos set about transforming himself into a late Renaissance Venetian master.

How and why he did this we do not know. It was an enormous intellectual and aesthetic leap; perhaps no greater than Jackson Pollock's move from figurative regionalist to abstract drip painter, but certainly comparable. Where

did he obtain the energy and confidence? His origins are unknown, but the choice of painting as a trade does not suggest wealth or education. Later in life El Greco lived as an intellectual and a gentleman, writing, as only the most thoughtful and self-advertising renaissance artists did, treatises on painting and architecture (sadly lost, although they may turn up one day in some uncatalogued Spanish library). But this may have been pure self-invention.

He was certainly a man of huge pride and belief in himself. While in Rome, he is said to have offered to repaint Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* – under fire because of its quantity of nudes – with more seemliness and equal quality. This may not be true, but there are caustic comments on Michelangelo's ability to paint, written in his own hand in the margin of his copy of Vasari. His career in Spain was punctuated by fierce disputes about payment, caused by El Greco's (correct) belief that his talents were not being valued enough.

But how did this young Greek, however arrogant and talented, set about becoming a Venetian painter? He was at one time thought to have worked in Titian's studio – he was noted as a 'disciple of Titian' when he arrived in Rome in 1570. But it seems unlikely that Titian, the greatest, richest and most famous painter in the world, could have had much use for a Cretan working in an idiom nearly 300 hundred years out of date. Ambitious and obscure, he probably picked things up as best he could.

One can watch the process taking place – probably – in two paintings, the *Modena Triptych*, and *The Purification of the Temple* from Washington. Both were in the Madrid version of the exhibition. The *Modena Triptych* has long been a controversial painting, and, looking at it, one can see why. It seems to be the missing link of El Greco studies, a painting poised almost exactly half way between the Byzantine and Renaissance traditions, and signed, it seems,

El Greco, *Modena Triptych*, *c.*1569, tempera on panel, 37 × 60 cm

by the master (or, at any rate, signed CHEIR DOMENIK/KOU – by the hand of Domenikos).

Yet it isn't very good. Parts of it are painted roughly, really incompetently. Christ, for instance, in the centre of one of the main panels – *The Allegory of the Coronation of the Christian Knight* – is as far as drawing goes a definite fail at A-level art. The perspective recession of the *Annunciation* is a terrible mess – not a charming mess like Duccio's, but an awkward, careless-looking mess. The brush-work throughout is brusque; the style a strange mingling of completely Greek elements, such as Mount Sinai rising like a domed campanile from the plain, and absolutely Renaissance figures, including the nude Adam and Eve. It is a real cross-cultural cut-up of a painting.

Consequently, art historians who use quality as a yardstick – including the curators of the last big El Greco show – have rejected the *Modena Triptych*. But it strains credulity a little to imagine that there were two Greek painters called Domenikos independently, and contemporaneously, following this precarious route between Byzantium and Venice. Furthermore, when one turns to the Washington *Purification*, which everyone agrees is by El Greco, one finds similar incompetence, rather less pronounced. The perspective arrangement – probably cribbed from an architectural handbook, as the composition was from a well-known invention of Michelangelo's – is still a mess, but a more convincing one.

The faces and the figures are similar in type to the Modena ones, but done better – A-level pass. There are still strange oddities, suggesting lack of real familiarity with the Renaissance idiom (the lady reclining on the lower left has no left leg, for example). What one is no doubt looking at here are two points on the steep and abbreviated learning curve of a brilliant outsider in a tremendous hurry.

Amazingly quickly, he got it – the whole machinery of Renaissance painting, the drawing, the naturalism, when he wanted to do it, the bravura brushwork at which the clumsiness of the *Modena Triptych* was perhaps aiming. Looking at a painting such as *Boy Lighting a Candle* dating from 1570–76, no one would guess that a few years previously its painter had been producing Byzantine icons. He had negotiated 300 years of art history in less than a decade.

El Greco internalised the stylistic attitudes of late sixteenth-century Venice and Rome, leaning to the former when it came to handling paint and flesh, and to the school of Parma for emotionality. His favourite painters – we know from a list in one of his marginal annotations – were Titian, first and foremost, followed by Tintoretto, Raphael, Correggio and Parmigianino.

He considered Tintoretto's Crucifixion in the Scuola di San Rocco, 'The greatest painting that exists today in the world', but the figure of the Magdalen in Correggio's *Madonna and Child with Saints Jerome and Mary Magdalen*,

Greco, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, left panel of *Modena Triptych*

El Greco, *The Purification of the Temple*, *c.* 1610–14, oil on canvas, 126 × 98.5 cm

he thought 'the most singular figure in all of painting'. About Michelangelo, he was ambivalent. On the one hand, he freely borrowed from him; on the other, he declared that 'Michelangelo did not know how to paint portraits or represent flesh tones... And as for imitating colours as they appear to the eye, it cannot be denied that this was a fault with him'.

So the arrogant Cretan chose *à la carte* from the menu of Renaissance painting. Venetian flesh – for which oil painting was invented – loose handling in the manner of Titian and Tintoretto. Those billowing clouds come from Tintoretto too. The elongated figures can be traced to Parmigianino; the glucose emotionality of his figures – those saints with shiny gob-stopper eyes – comes from Correggio, whose ardent Magdalen is a bit much for modern sensibilities.

Obviously, it's an entirely Italian list, and ostensibly El Greco became an entirely Italian painter. In 1570 he was admitted to membership of the Roman Academy of St Luke, the professional painters' organisation – admittedly as a painter of miniatures, but still it was acceptance. From then on, he worked in Rome, until in 1577 – like other ambitious Italian painters – he went to Spain in search of patronage. As we have seen, he didn't find it at the court of Philip II, but he did in the cathedral city of Toledo, crammed with churches and pious intellectuals.

What I want to suggest is that El Greco was a great representative of the late Renaissance – in some ways the last giant of sixteenth-century Venice. But that he simultaneously remained at some level a Byzantine painter, and it was that subliminal linkage that made him so accessible to twentieth-century modernists.

El Greco's choices, it seems to me, were often, in Freudian terms, over-determined. That is, he chose from Italian art those elements that echoed Byzantium. Tintoretto was fond of piling up his figures from top to bottom of the canvas in a shallow space (look for example at his *Last Judgement* in the Madonna del Orto. El Greco did it too, but even more so – indeed it got him into trouble when he painted the *Disrobing of Christ* for Toledo Cathedral, because pedantic clerics pointed out that mere members of the crowd were represented above the holy head of Christ. Of course, in a different idiom, this is also what Georgios Klontzas did in his Last Judgement. El Greco painted soft and yielding flesh in the Venetian manner – he could be a wonderful portrait painter – but his holy figures seem illuminated from within, just like Damaskinos's St John the Baptist.

Some of the mixtures are less obvious. The drama, the spiritual rush of his paintings, their dynamism, the way that Christ shoots upwards in the Prado *Resurrection*, for example, the figures below like a jigsaw of flames – all this is an individual development of Tintoretto in particular, and mannerism in general. But the intensity, and the way the Resurrection takes place in a burnished space one figure deep – those perhaps are the Byzantine heritage reasserting itself, consciously or unconsciously. And the turbulence, the way that the heavenly gold of the icons has been replaced by churning, billowing banks of cloud – that maybe represents, as well as a memory of Tintoretto, the turbulence of this ambitious, arrogant religious renegade and cross-cultural explorer.

What I am arguing, and what – I think – this exhibition is arguing, is that El Greco was not essentially anything, Byzantine, Venetian, Roman, Spanish, but, just like all of us, the product of his history and personality. Even Spain made its contribution by allowing his full individuality to bloom in a climate which was intellectually in the Renaissance but visually still half in the Middle Ages. In counter-reformation Rome, still more the Rome of his younger contemporaries Carracci and Caravaggio, El Greco would have been forced into a much more conventional path. Indeed, his Roman work, and the work of his early Spanish period actually is much more conventionally in the Renaissance idiom.

El Greco's wildness and oddity grew on him as he painted away in Toledo, decade after decade. His late *Purification of the Temple* still uses that Michelangelo composition, but makes little attempt at spatial recession. As a result the figures at either side seem utterly out of scale, but the whole is harmonious, a painting which only one man, one unique trajectory across art history, could possibly have produced.

Though he became more Byzantine as he grew older, broadly speaking El Greco's career was a whirlwind approach to the Renaissance from the Middle Ages. That is, from flatness, abstraction, schematisation, expressive distortion, towards naturalism and perspective. That explains his hold on early modernists, who were making the same journey in the opposite direction.

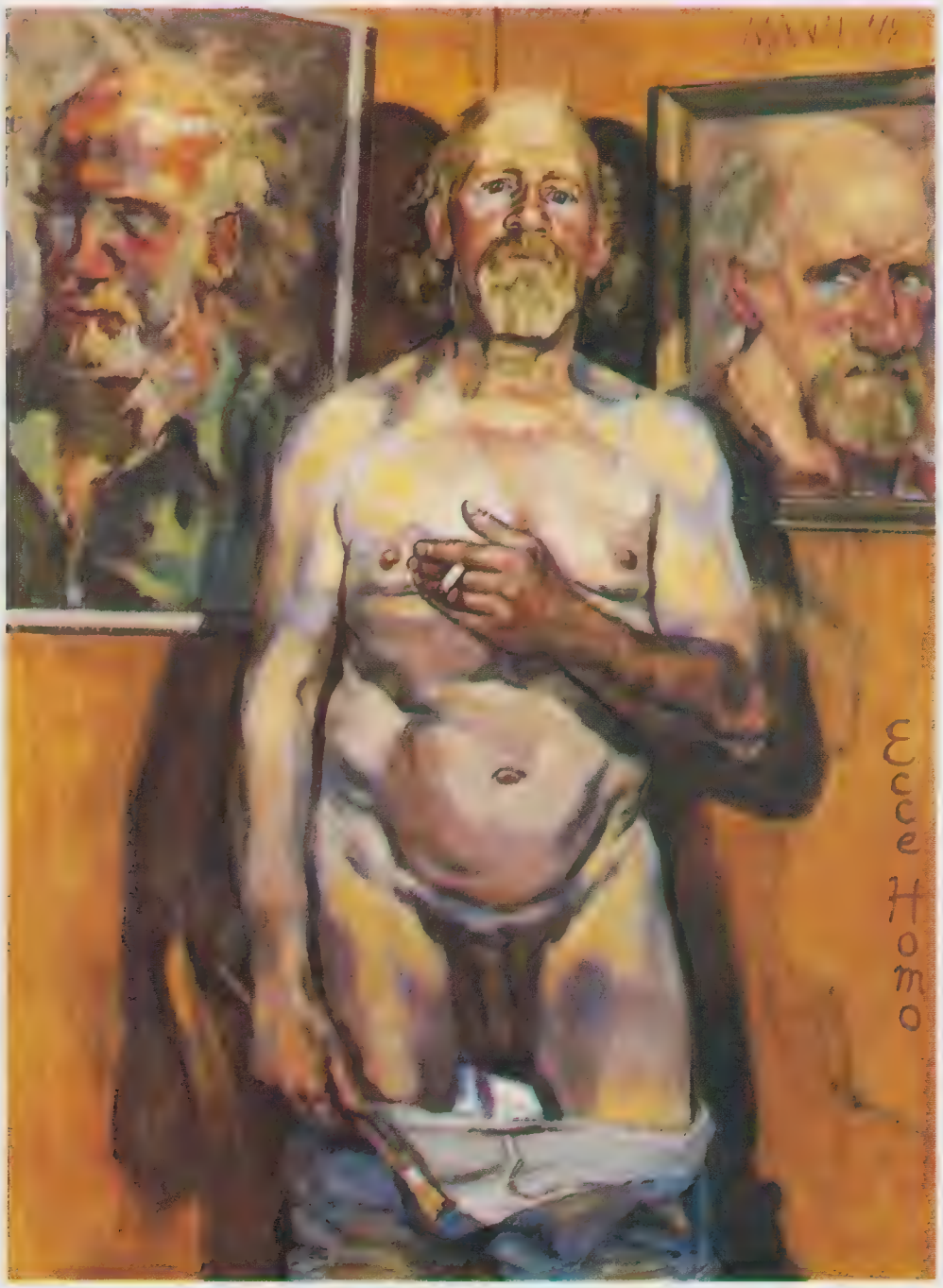
The fact that El Greco seems once again to have gone out of fashion is partly a sign that the early modernist predicament is no longer ours. However, it is also to do with the abundance of bad work in El Greco's name, much of it turned out by his studio and his son Jorge Manuel – named after father and brother – in an attempt to sustain the gentlemanly life-style of a Titian or a Tintoretto. Consequently, there are plenty of bad El Grecos around, and plenty in this exhibition – the coarse *Agony in the Garden* from the National Gallery, for instance. Also, there is a dearth of the really big pictures in which – like Tintoretto – he showed his ability to animate huge spaces, whole rooms. In Madrid, the unchronological hang made it difficult to make sense of what one was looking at.

But there were also sufficient masterpieces, and enough fascinating conundrums such as the *Modena Triptych* to make it clear that Picasso was right to revere El Greco. Perhaps if we concentrate on his cross-cultural audacity, his ability to link unlike traditions, he will again become one of those painters of the past in whom we see our own dilemmas and passions reflected.

'El Greco: Identity and Transformation', 10 June –19 September, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome; 14 October–17 January 2000, National Gallery, Athens. Sponsored by Barclays.

El Greco, Identity and Transformation, Museo Thyssen Bornernsza/Skira, £40.

CYRIL MANN



Ecce Homo, 1978 Oil on canvas 136 × 103 cm

The Sun is God: The Life and Work of Cyril Mann by John Russell Taylor
Book Launch: 2 October – The 20th Century British Art Fair. The Royal College of Art. London

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Tom Paulin

Man Walking the Stairs

– but the stairs are outside in a stormy garden
where they seem as wild and as bent as the trees
trees van Gogh or Kokoschka would've recognised
which isn't to say it's at all a secondhand garden
only these trees are ecstatic dionysiac deeply unsettled
oily and ochre and deadened raw yellowgreen
– dingy deliberately dingy is the look and texture they have
– remember Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*? well
these are wild poplars or beeches or chestnuts – but
maybe the poplar that rubbery tree is most likely?
and from poplar to populace is only a short step
so the crowd or the mob have elbowed their way in
which turns all those swirls into street action dustups
which isn't perhaps as farfetched as you might think
for as Canetti points out the crowd has many symbols
– fire the sea rain rivers forests corn wind sandheaps and treasure
so the trees are flames that'll either attract a crowd
or represent already the crowd they attract
which means that the cobbled foamfleece in Hopkins's *Wreck*
is a street or a square where halfbricks cobbles bottles and stones
as well as petrol bombs and metal bolts are flying
for Hopkins attended monster meetings in Phoenix Park
and knew a fellow priest who watched the Communards
rise up like the rooks in Rimbaud's *Les Corbeaux*
– that *armée étrange aux cris sévères*
but if the trees are a crowd in action
why are these steps called stairs?
maybe *l'escalier* means inside/outside?
maybe it means both? and why
is it *man walking* which I read first as *man climbing*?
I suppose in both cases it's just a mistranslation
– Man *Walking the Stairs* is definitely odd

the *ting tang tonk tunk* of two slightly wrong notes
– like *do a tobacco* for *faire un tabac* that is *have a hit*
or *I you ask* for *je vous en prie*
but because I'm in the National Gallery in Merrion Square
I've no means of knowing till I get back home
and check it in the book on Soutine that my pal Jamie has
– book? well the huge *Catalogue Raisonné*
maybe then I'll find out
if it's the climbing the walking man's back
and his face I can see
and if he's coming or going over
what might be a bridge or an airbright thoroughfare
crossing a stream or a pond
– maybe a pontifex or pontoon
but whatever it is it makes me uneasy
because this stormtossed this in a way nautical garden
has such a closedin such a claustrophobic feeling
and the climbing man is hunched or contorted in some way
– has he his hands tied behind his back like a prisoner?
so he may be taking a last look over his shoulder?
– it could be the Bridge of Sighs then
transposed to nature?
though of course a garden is more than nature
just as the Bridge of Sighs is more than a stone opera
just as the man climbing the steps or the stairs
is more than a man climbing
in the year nineteen hundred and twentytwo
– like a prisoner or a refugee
this man's been told – *walk!*
and everything – stormy trees oily shapes colours
everything in the painting is unhappy
is coerced or coercive
except within it the spirit of the painter
that represents the man
almost as though he's the Wandering Jew
who has been ordered to act the part of a felon
desperately treading a treadmill in a circus tent
that a big wind has blown into rips and tatters □

Chaim Soutine, *Man Walking the Stairs*, 1919–22, oil on canvas, 81.5 65 cm.
National Gallery of Ireland

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Julian Mitchell

All Myein and Betty Martin

Our cub reporter earns his Carpaccio in the end

The Biennale is a circus, and clowns are handing out flyers long before you get to the Giardini. Roll up, roll up, watch elephants doing abstracts! (No, mate, on video. Bring live elephants to Venice? They'd sink it.) Roll up, roll up! Get your free tattoo from Slovakia! (T-shirts, love? Try Austria.) Roll up, roll up! Cheer Cherie Blair! Gasp with her at Day-Glo dreams of Oz! Count teddy-bears! Ask, Is This Art? in sixteen languages! Plant a kati tree and remember Nagasaki! Watch the rain come down! Get soaked!

Boatloads of tacky sculpture bobbed up and down off the vaporetto stop. There was a man riding an inflated penis. Exhibitionist? Exhibitor? Social critic? I'd never been to one of these jamborees before, and saw art everywhere. And as artists are always painting circuses, I thought I might find something I really liked.

Twenty-four hours later I was in the Icelandic Pavilion as the clouds opened. The pictures were abstract, another indistinguishable half-dozen of the thousand variations on the colour-blindness test chart which dotted their measly way across acre after acre of innocent canvas. I'd had enough spots before my eyes, thankyou, and the rain was about as exciting as the drizzling videos which filled so many pavilions. If the canvas had only been made into sails, I might be out on the lagoon now, rejoicing in the storm and its Tiepolo skies. But here I was in Iceland, quite possibly trapped till nightfall, with Venice sinking slowly and people asking each other in Icelandic, Whither Art?, and only one bottle of Aquavit in sight, and that rapidly emptying. Whither me?, I thought, putting up my umbrella. Enthusiasm for contemporary art had almost evaporated, and the Carpaccios weren't far away. But I'd vowed to see everything at the Biennale before that treat, and I still had seven shows to do before the Arsenale. Across the way was the Dutch Pavilion, with a show called *The Pencil of Nature*. A homage to Fox Talbot – hurrah! I paddled over, hope regained. But no, not lovely early photos of Wiltshire haystacks, just walls of check tablecloths masquerading as paintings. Hadn't the Dutch got a Peter Jones? The rain was easing off. Let's try Uruguay.

Sigurdur Arni Sigurdsson, *Untitled*, 1999, oil on canvas, 200 × 224 cm. Iceland

People had told me I was mad to try and see everything, but in the end I did visit all the pavilions in the Giardini at least once (except Canada, which was hiding), and at least for a few moments. I managed a stroll through the Arsenale, too. What struck me first was the tattiness of the site – it's about the same age as Wembley Stadium and in just as urgent a need of a refit. The host nation's own entrance hall has crumbling '20 frescoes in the dome (unless they were something to do with the oversized and overturned vase below??), and other embarrassments, both architectural and cultural, abound. But what's really out of date in the age of the video and installation is the concept of a giant art exhibition at all. When you go to an exhibition of paintings, you wander round at a steady pace, giving each picture a few seconds, and waiting for the happy moment when something leaps off the wall and seizes your attention. Then you stop and look properly. It may not be fair, it may not be correct, but that's all you can do on a preliminary

Right and title pictures: Ann Hamilton, *myein*, 1999, multimedia, installation

reconnoitre. Later you go round again and, if you're lucky, if there's time, again. Art needs time above everything. But the Biennale demands your whole life. Many works are as long as films; many *are* films. But at a film festival you don't put on all the films at once and expect people to drop in for a couple of minutes each. Yet here that's all you can hope to do. Unless you spend the whole summer in Venice and do one pavilion a day. Which would be very nice. But even then you wouldn't have time for all the exhibits. You'd be too busy reading up about them first. If you didn't, you wouldn't have the slightest idea what half of them were about.

The American pavilion is a good example. The whole building has been turned into an installation by Ann Hamilton called *myein*, and it's said to have cost two million dollars, a sum defrayed by Gucci, among others. I went round before reading anything, thinking to get an immediate impression, unhampered by artspeak. For their money the sponsors get a rippling glass screen in front of the building, and inside it walls covered with Braille dots on to which puffs of shocking pink powder are released from the cornices, while a voice murmurs unintelligibly from grilles in the walls. I stared, I listened, I was wholly baffled. So I turned to the catalogue and hand-outs.

> From the beginning the artist found the scale and proportions of the Pavilion hesitating ambivalently between an inviting modesty and aspirations to civic grandeur and authority.

Aha! So Ann Hamilton was one of those embarrassed by her site. The glass screen was to hide the eighteenth-century look of the pavilion, with its worryingly non-p.c. reminders of Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson, slave-owner, but also philosopher of democracy sympathetic to the French revolution. But –

> She felt that interpreting the four interior rooms as neutral 'white cubes', the modernist exhibition paradigm, betrayed the original carnal and sacred function associated with ancient Greek temple architecture to which the Pavilion looked back.

So she liked classical architecture, in spite of its American associations. Ambivalence, indeed! And that shocking pink powder was carnal! Or was it sacred? 'My early thoughts', she is quoted as saying, 'began with air and wind, in thinking about the way we are affected by particles and events we cannot see.' Bugs – did she mean bugs?

There was a lot more of this sort of stuff, talk about 'democratic social space', which I'm not sure about at all, and the 'critical reciprocal relationship between interior and exterior', which is easy; we've all had a squalid morning-after. The glass screen, among other things, meant you couldn't see the pavilion façade properly from the park, it altered its look, and – you know what? – it also altered the look of the park from the pavilion! Also, you had to go round it, whether left or right, to get in. Oh, God, had I betrayed myself? I'd come from the Scandinavian pavilion – should it have been from Israel? Or round the back from Uruguay? The Braille texts, it turned out, were poems by Charles Reznikoff, of whom I had never previously heard. He 'shared the great project of using the American historical record of injustice and social barbarism as a primary subject'. The mystery voice was the artist's own. She was whispering a speech by Abraham Lincoln, not word for word, but letter by letter, translated into international phonetics by international phonies. (Stop that at once! This is part of a great shared project!) *Myein* refers to an abnormal contraction of the pupil of the eye, and is also the etymological root of the word 'mystery'. Now did I understand? Sorry, no. If art has anything to do with communication, this was definitely not it.

When Hamilton appeared at the official opening, she was very chic, in white jacket and skirt over black top. Her minders – ('commissioners' has such gloomy overtones – commissioners in lunacy, Soviet commissars) – were two no-nonsense ladies. They read the handouts we'd already perused without adding or subtracting a word. Perhaps they felt safer within their own limitations, but I, for one, was none the wiser. Hamilton herself had style and charm. She thanked her sponsors warmly, as well she might, at that price. The installation, she told us, was 'a series of landscapes, a succession of veils', though 'ultimately about air'. The powder was pink because it had a presence you can't quite name, an 'in-betweenness'. It shocked her every morning when she came along to see how it was getting on. It felt as though it came from somewhere else. It was toxic but beautiful. It wasn't easily nameable, you couldn't pin it down. Like the whole installation, you might say. I still hadn't a notion of what it was about.

Now there are, I'm sure, people who like this kind of thing, who love to puzzle over recherché references, who get real pleasure from hearing Abraham Lincoln deconstructed and feel a glow, not necessarily self-righteous, at knowing that whatever is sifting pinkly down the walls is using social barbarism as a primary subject and is subverting the modernist exhibition paradigm. But I am not one of them. I thought *myein* so relentlessly, deliberately, obtusely obscure it made *Finnegan's Wake* seem like *Babar*. I thought Ann Hamilton didn't want me to understand what she was doing. In fact I felt I was lucky to be allowed in without a PhD in Pretension from the College of Pataphysics.

But suppose I had appreciated it. How much preparation, how many degrees, would I have needed to do so? And how much time would I have had for the rest of the Biennale? By mid-afternoon of the first day I was limping back to my hotel with enough reading matter for months, and I wasn't a quarter of the way round. Which is why the whole concept is balmy and the people who come off best are traditional painters and sculptors with old-fashioned shows. That meant, within the official raree-show, Gary Hume, and outside it, Caro and Oldenburg. No doubt there were others I never got to.

A raree show, for those with a bent for the historical record, was originally a peep-show carried round in a box. There were one or two boxes at Venice, but the most promising peeping seemed to come in dark back rooms, as in gay bars in New York in the 1970s, but with art videos instead of porn ones. Alas, most art videos, to anyone in the professional film world, are laughably amateur. The amateurishness is sometimes an intentional rejection of professional standards, hopelessly tainted by Hollywood, social injustice and barbarism, but the point has long been taken, and 'authentic' lighting and camerawork are now the rage among non-art film-makers. (The recent Danish film *Festen* is an example.) In most of the videos I saw, the pictures were out of focus, the story-line non-existent, the sound appalling and the characters, though usually asleep,

Katarzyna Kozyra, *Bath House for Men* (detail), 1999, video installation. Poland

Katharina Fritsch, *Rat King* (detail), 1992–3, iron, polyester, paint, height 280 cm, diameter 130 cm

Gamal Abdel Nasser Abou El Yazid & Shady El Noshokaty, *Models of Venice installation*, 1999, Egypt

badly acted. The result was terminally dull. By the time I reached the Polish pavilion no trace of the old sense of fearful anticipation remained as I plunged once again into darkness. But once my eyes adjusted, I found myself in a bath-house and thought for a moment I'd been wafted twenty years back in time. Yet the origins of Katarzyna Kozyra's video were much older. It invoked, with one startling difference, the semi-porn bath-house pictures of the nineteenth century from Ingres to Alma Tadema, with all their references back to classical Greece and Rome. But instead of beautiful ladies with wisps of clothing in what used to be known as strategic places, here it was all men, with wisps and without, and instead of youth, elegance and beauty – age, obesity, and ugliness. The sad, sagging figures went in and out of the pool in the background, lolled on benches, and walked about displaying their all, perfectly at ease in this unpretentious male world. There was one exception: a slim, rather nervous youth, occasionally stretching out on a bench but quickly sitting up again, was clearly not at all at ease. This youth had a towel draped over his shoulders and was being eyed up by a slightly older but well-built man, not bad-looking in that chamber of otherwise flabby horrors.

All this was being shown on four screens at the centre of the darkened room. At each end other screens showed someone being made up with a false moustache and chest hair, and – good heavens above, it was a woman, it was the artist herself, being fitted with a false penis! This was subversion indeed, deconstruction, historical barbarism, sacrilege, you name it! The boy on the marble bench was a woman in disguise! And she wasn't peeping at all, she was outright ogling!

The show was called, with an elegant bow to Rimbaud, *I am Another*. The handout, alas, was the usual drivel about sexuality being a phenomenon exceeding the division of the sexes, etc, etc. (Maybe it sounded better in Polish with lots of zs.) But you didn't need it. People got the political social point very quickly, and they loved it when the woman man/artist furtively fumbled her false penis to make sure it was still there. They laughed, they stayed for ten minutes, a quarter of an hour – gosh, is that the time? The artist didn't just make her points, she made them with wit and style and memorable images. Of course it raised familiar questions from docu-drama: did the bathers know they were being filmed? Surely not. Is it right to use people without their permission? Kozyra didn't seem concerned. She had her own scruples to look after. I came out thinking, Carry On Katarzyna. Video doesn't have to be dull. It was the only one in the whole Biennale to which I wanted to return.

But no time, no time. On, on, and over to the Italian pavilion, full of huge black rats with their tails knotted

Ann Veronica Janssen, *Untitled*, 1999, various materials, sound, mist, Belgium

Peter Bonde & Jason Rhoades, *The Snowball*, 1999, installation, Denmark

Veronika Bromová, *Zemzoo*, 1998, multimedia installation, 120 × 120 cm. Czech Republic

together, a homage, presumably, to Michael Dibden. The Italians had gone oriental and filled their enormous space with knowing Chinese comments on Western art. These were mostly dire, but there was one very funny painting of a small boy in military uniform being severely ticked off by his parents for having broken Duchamp's *Large Glass*. Give that boy a medal, Mao! It was in the Italian pavilion that I witnessed an art myth actually taking place. A puzzled punter asked a guard whether a fire hose was a genuine hose or an art exhibit. (I'd been wondering myself, as it happens.) The guard was angry, he thought he was being mocked. But the obvious answer was, It was both. France had two empty rooms; it wasn't clear whether this was by accident or design, and all the French would talk about was Madame Blair. The Belgians had a room full of mist,

Veronika Bromová, *Zemzoo*, 1998, multimedia installation, 120 × 120 cm. Czech Republic

doubtless to hide their disgraced politicians. The Swiss had a small van full of water. 'Originale', said an Italian, with a moue of distaste. The Danes had racing cars, but they were obviously not genuine, because there was no commentary from Murray Walker. There were a lot of Emmett-like machines; people seemed to like those, but I was never good at Meccano and was unmoved. There were also a lot of furry animals. The best of these was in the Czech pavilion, where what looked like a feathered baby polar-bear swam through the darkness. Unfortunately it was surrounded by disgusting photos of some poor woman tied up with plastic tubing. One of the striking things about the Biennale as a whole was how Picasso is still the strongest influence on living artists. The Egyptian pavilion was largely a homage to his chair sculptures. Most pompous exhibit came from Spain: a room with a mirror one end, and a huge gilt frame filling the middle. As you went in you saw yourself framed with 'En El Marco del Arte' above your head. As if we didn't know. Best TV interview I saw being given was by an aged Chinaman with a wispy beard and half-specs, exactly like someone in a children's comic 50 years ago. His joke was also old: completely bare canvases. Best bag was British, but the Brits got a bit stroppy after a while, everyone wanted one.

If some artists had difficulties with their pavilions at the Giardini, they had none with the magnificent structures at the Arsenale, where even the tritest installation looked better for the space. The rain was coming through the roof of a vast shed full of bottles. Was it meant to or not? The thing looked fine either way. There was another shed full of junk with a blue electric filament. There was another where people took out their frustrations with modern art on a huge range of drums – Interactive Art Criticism. Modern art spread for acres. I was walking mechanically by now, the art passing before my eyes as if it were a single interminable installation. I needed refreshment. Carpaccio was only

Wang Xingwei, *Poor Old Hamilton*, 1996, oil on canvas, 220 × 180 cm

a couple of canals away. I quickened my pace.

Most people seemed to be at the Biennale for social reasons. As at Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair the chief object was to get as many hobbyhorses and as much gingerbread as possible. A Bellini meant pink peach pulp and champagne, not oil on wood or canvas. The smartest party was being given by the British Council, where, as it happened, Pulp was playing. Many a stall was overturned in the effort to get tickets. I was quite glad I wasn't famous enough to be invited. I don't usually move in art circles, and my impression of the international art administrator is of a man, or more often woman, with the haunted look of someone about to be found out. The last thing she wants to talk about is art, she just wants to know if she's got away with it for another day. But I like art and only wish there were more of it at the Biennale, where vacuity and pretension and sheer failure of imagination sadly held sway. Some countries obviously felt so hopeless about it they gave up altogether and offered trees to plant, like Japan, or language lessons for Kosovan refugees (Austria). Worthy, of course, and no doubt it got them some attention in the

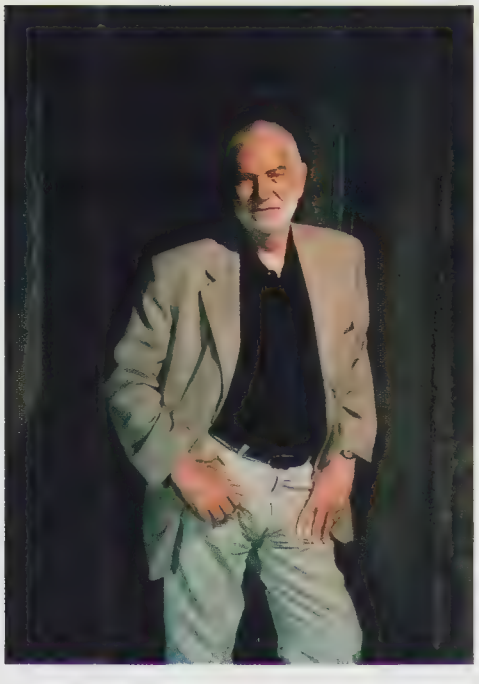
'Venice Biennale' until 7 November, Venice, Italy. Catalogue £59.

Vittore Carpaccio, *St Jerome Leads the Lion into the Monastery*

Bryan Robertson

The World's Last Night

Anthony Caro's Last Judgement



Sir Anthony Caro, with part of the *Last Judgement* in Antichi Granai, Venice Biennale, 1999. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art. Photo: David Buckland

In Venice this summer, the Antichi Granai on the Giudecca provided an appropriately plain, lofty and lengthy, brick-walled background for Anthony Caro's newest invention. The *Last Judgement* is a monumental but disquietingly intimate sequence in 25 parts, boxed-in, separated one from another like a series of sculptural *tableaux*, often larger than human scale and sometimes slightly less. Tackling as a total concept a tremendous theme, the work as a whole after three visits is firmly established in my mind as a scorching masterpiece, without precedent in twentieth-century sculpture.

Three visits because, to employ a suitable term, there is a hell of a lot to take in. The emotional onslaught is formidable once you become attuned to the visual language and its frequently disconcerting switches in mood – from a requiem-like formal austerity and restraint to a full-blooded expressionist wildness. The way in which each self-contained scene – *Torture Box*, *Elysian Fields*, *The Furies*, *Unknown Soldier* or *Civil War*, to name five at random – is presented within a massive wooden structure like a sentry box has a double-edged effect. At one level, we are safely removed from the action, as if contemplating tightly focused, spotlit scenes of murder or torture in a violent play seen on a stage, and distanced from the violence by the comfortingly familiar artificial frame of the proscenium arch. In fact, Caro was stimulated by the way in which Giotto's complex groups of figures are set within a framing device, not unlike boxes, in his wall paintings in the Arena Chapel in Padua or in Assisi. At another level, or in another sense, Caro's containing structures undercut contemplation with the far less reassuring sensation of watching, too close for comfort, caged wild beasts ravening and roaring at each other. Wild beasts of course do not set up for each other the kind of apparatus and ordeal implied in some of these sculptures and notable, obviously enough, in *Torture Box*. By chance, the *Last Judgement* was unveiled in Venice in early June against the not so distant background of ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Balkans.

There was much to celebrate at the opening because of the magnitude and sheer imaginative energy of Caro's vision in its plain but handsome installation, and because the work in its entirety had been bought by a German collector, Reinhold Würth, for something like a million and a quarter in sterling, with the offer to house the *Last Judgement* in his own museum after allowing it to travel for further exhibition, first to Berlin and then possibly to another city. China would be a great venue.

If the horrors of Kosovo unleashed in the background to the Venice opening were very much in people's minds, it was also plain to see that the *Last Judgement*, which took two years to complete, is the work of an artist at the absolute peak of his powers, in his mid-seventies, musing on the dark side of the twentieth century which has been persistent and of nightmare dimensions. We think of the Holocaust but do not always recall the probably even larger number of men and women systematically killed in Stalin's gulags or the other millions wiped out so horrifically

Anthony Caro, *Last Judgement*, view of the installation at the Antichi Granai, Venice, in the foreground: *The Bell Tower*

Anthony Caro, *Torture Box*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel, 208.5 × 110.5 × 95 cm

by Pol Pot in Cambodia – on top of the massive slaughter of innocent people in the Vietnam war and in Africa. Although we have suffered in wars, we live in an uninvaded island. We take refuge through art in the sensual pleasures of Matisse and Bonnard, Dufy and Léger, or take comfort from the elevated idealism of early modernists such as Mondrian or Malevitch; the ghastly violence of the century is almost too terrible to consider retrospectively as an artist's subject as we approach the Millennium.

Caro has responded courageously to the promptings of his conscience, with strong feeling tempered by dignity, clarity, gravity – and wit. Wit in art does not mean obvious jokes: in Caro's case, the astonishing sleight of hand with which he transforms his found materials has true wit; the crumbled and deflated fat face with piggy eyes in *Greed* is funny enough. These new sculptures objectify powerful emotion through abstract formal thinking. They might present problems for those who honour in Caro's oeuvre over the years the open buoyancy, vitality and sharp abstract inventiveness of early coloured works such as *Prairie* (1967) or *Orangerie* (1969) which define and charter space and perform with the fluidity of painting. The sombre, closed densities and controlled anger, uncoloured and quite unrelieved, of the *Last Judgement*, with its generalised titles drawn from Dante and the Bible referring to urgent emotion, might seem a wrong-headed departure. In reality, the *Last Judgement* is a boldly climactic work which richly embodies at maximum pressure a number of stylistic pursuits in Caro's sculptures of the last two decades.

For the time being, however, I think that it may mean more to an older generation who directly experienced in one way or another the 1939–45 war. That generation is marked by experiences which left a commonly felt sense of outrage, reinforced by the final documentary disclosures in newsreels at that time of what had happened in Belsen, Dachau and the other concentration camps. A younger generation has strong feelings and imaginative compassion, but it lacks that extreme dimension of shock and pain.

Although, as I have said, Caro's *Last Judgement* is without precedent in twentieth-century sculpture, a number of strongly characterised aspects of Caro's oeuvre since 1980 provide clear individual signs of stylistic intent which at last come together in the present composite work. Ideally, each link in the chain of visual events that comprise the *Last Judgement* should be considered separately, one by one, for there are considerable variations in emotional ends and formal means – the elegantly muted serenity of *Elysian Fields* stands out poignantly in all the violence – but I haven't the space for all of them. I believe that it is generically helpful here to refer to two recent sculptures of vast dimensions, the majestically nocturnal and spellbound *Night Movements* (1987–90), in the Tate Gallery, and the more architectonic *Promenade* (1996), which was first disclosed in Paris in 1996 as a spectacular part of the highly personal but rewarding celebration of British sculpture in the twentieth century selected by Daniel Abady for the Jeu de Paume. Both these works, powerful and stirring in themselves, follow a sequential or processional format in which massively simple forms pitch a kind of humanised geometry of swelling curves, quadrants and hollow, semi-tubular shapes in an overall roughly architectonic format, a discipline first glimpsed partially in Caro's earlier architectural essays in form and structure: *The Moroccans* (1984–7), *Xanadu* (1986–8), *Alhambra* (1990–4), *The Caliph's Garden* (1989–92), and in several tablepieces.

Before any of these sculptures, Caro made a directly architectural, not merely architectonic, piece: the big *Child's Tower Room* of 1983–4. Wrongheadedly, I hardly bothered to take this piece in when it was first shown at the Tate, because it seemed too perilously near an adventure playground toy for sophisticated children, and I dismissed it accordingly. Preoccupied by its function, I missed the abstract implications of its form.

With hindsight, the *Child's Tower Room* was an important harbinger of Caro's ongoing preoccupation with architecture. He is, recently, co-designer with Norman Foster of a beautiful new bridge for Bankside that will link the new Tate with the wilder shores of Mammon. In his sculpture since the early '80s, Caro has shown also an increasing concern for a specifically cubist interplay and balance between open and closed volumes and long, flat, slanting horizontal forms counterpointed with sensuous curves. This, of course, might be true of any sculptor's formal concern, but in the early '80s Caro realigned constant factors at work in most of his larger assemblages – remember his off-putting but fascinating spatial use of steel mesh

Anthony Caro, *Child's Tower Room*, 1983–84, Japanese oak, varnished, 381 × 274.5 × 274.5cm
Photo: Shigeo Anzai

Anthony Caro. *Elysian Fields*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel, 210 × 164 × 87.5 cm

sheets? – under the coordinating rhythm, as it were, of a cubist-related use of form and space.

Cubism was invented by Picasso and Braque primarily for pictorial purposes, for paintings and collages laid out on a flat ground in which the new Cubist perspective provided a multi-faceted view of a single object or person seen simultaneously, all on the same frontal plane, from different angles. Although Picasso is supposed to have made the first Cubist sculpture, *Head of a Woman*, in 1909, I have never felt quite easy with Cubist portraiture of static human beings: the Italian Futurists used Cubism better, I feel, when they created sculptures of people and objects *in motion*. Even Duchamp, a dull painter, made a better fist of it in his *Nude Descending a Staircase* than the earlier and more orthodox Cubist men with pipes and other static portraits animated only by a flutter of cascading views of a nose or an ear.

Cubism in sculpture found its form best with Synthetic Cubism, a more frankly decorative extension of Cubism fastening mainly on the more grateful elements of still life, explored within a more pliable space. This was when Picasso devised the strong colour variations in 1914 for the six casts made for him of his *Absinthe Glass* sculpture, and in 1917 invented the most successful Cubist treatment of three-dimensional form as sculpture in the two awkward but memorable costumes-as-buildings he devised for the French Manager and the American Manager in the Cocteau/Satie/Massine ballet *Parade*.

An unsung hero of this period in Cubist sculpture is Archipenko, the Russian-born artist who lived and worked in Paris and Nice at the same time as Braque and Picasso, but who had his studio in New York after 1920. Between 1909 and 1914, Archipenko made the first fully polychromatic sculptures, establishing in a series of brilliantly coloured, low-relief works the principles of positive and negative abstract space which so exercised artists everywhere 50 years later. These early works by Archipenko, perfectly pitched between sculpture and painting, foreshadow Constructivism and radically extend the dialogue between sculpture and painting. Archipenko's 1912 assemblage *Medrano I*, a revolutionary masterpiece, was in the historic New York Armory Show of 1913. He must be ranked with Picasso as the inventor of modern polychromatic sculpture. A room of his beautiful boxed late Cubist assemblages in the Tel Aviv museum from a private collection is an exhilarating experience.

If cubism works best for sculpture in the wider and amplified decorative vocabulary of Synthetic Cubism, as we see in Archipenko's and Picasso's work, this is precisely the fertile ground appropriated by Caro in his more obviously Cubist-inspired works. One of them, indeed, is entitled *Homage to Cubism* (1989–90), and even without the strong colours and directly figurative references in Archipenko's *Woman at her Toilet* of 1916, the similarities are evident. Caro has no knowledge of Archipenko; the connection is purely coincidental through his use of a late Cubist formal language in some aspects of assemblage.

The joke is that Synthetic Cubism has generally been downgraded by purist art historians as being a weakened, because 'decorative' and therefore trivialised or even vulgarised, extension of Cubism, an enfeebled late flowering. The English puritanical distaste for anything labelled 'decoration' blinds us to much that is important. But for me Synthetic Cubism has its own strengths, just as the Art Deco extensions of the first pure modernist principles in twentieth-century architecture have also their own extraordinary strengths, vitality – and cheerful charm. And Caro's architectural allegiances are evidently – *pace Caliph's Garden* or *Child's Tower Room* – not untouched by the drily sensuous decorative pleasures of Art Deco. It is clear from these sculptures that Caro's interests are partially rooted in this period – in which he grew up – and in Le Corbusier's majestically curving Ronchamp chapel, or his recent sympathy for Frank Gehry's buildings, rather than the earlier and more angular modernist purity of Mies van der Rohe and his associates. Caro of course doesn't think along these lines consciously at all, but his versatile sensuality unconsciously flows in particular directions.

But Caro's continuously animating creative drive is essentially expressionist in nature, as we see in his earliest modelled sculptures cast in bronze, the *Man Lighting a Cigarette*, the *Woman Pulling on a Girdle*, and other dense, heavy, if tersely expressionist, works. His first forays into abstract sculpture with brightly coloured I-beams were equally heavy, not just in their materials straddling the ground, but in the weight of their formal disposition. The pace quickened, the coloured forms left the ground and

Alexander Archipenko, *Woman at her Toilet*, 1916, sculpto-painting of painted wood, painted sheet metal on oil, on cardboard, 86 · 64.5 · 5cm

Anthony Caro, *Hell is a City*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel, 208.5 × 120 × 80 cm

Anthony Caro, *Flesh*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel, 209 × 118 × 74 cm

through the '60s became weightless and buoyant in spirit as well as form. Suddenly there was the witty silver *Hopscotch*. The rest is history. But I submit that all of Caro's work has as its underlying energy an expressionist compulsion, and it is the way in which this expressionist imagination is trapped, distilled and re-directed that gives all of his subsequent work – which appears to be the reverse of expressionist – its special force and character.

In the *Last Judgement*, some aspects of Caro's expressionist nature are more clearly revealed, but the work as a whole, far from being retrogressive, consolidates and moves ahead formally. His use of assemblage once had something of the immediacy and improvisatory impact of the sketch as a grand, considered statement, so widely practised and celebrated in this century from Picasso on. More recently, Caro's assemblages have gained a magisterial authority and weight, denying their roots in improvisation.

In his seventies, Caro has evidently been thinking about art and life in this century and the ways in which artists have dealt with the larger issues thrown up in their own lifetimes. Artists through history have fed a lot of their emotion into the all-embracing theme of the Last Judgement; Caro has circumnavigated the problem of dealing with this subject in an era of diminished religious faith, or belief in a Judgement Day, by playing fast and loose with the Bible, Dante, mythology and eternally recurring motifs like 'Prisoners' or 'Torture' in a freewheeling way, although *Judas* and the *Last Trump* are real enough. When Henry Moore was about the same age as Caro is now, he began to talk with greater enthusiasm about Rodin or Donatello than he had, earlier, about Picasso as a sculptor, or Brancusi. The mature mind plays with history, but this does not necessarily imply regressive art. Moore, it should be remembered, made some of his most powerful sculptures in his last few years – the great Hill Arches in Canberra, for example – and so did Barbara Hepworth with her Family of Man group, when she was old and ill. Caro isn't backtracking or straying from

Anthony Caro, *Prisoners*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel, 205 × 202 × 82.5 cm. All images of the *Last Judgement* courtesy Museum Würth, Germany, and photographed by David Buckland

Anthony Caro, *Greed and Envy*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel. 210 × 111 × 90 cm

Anthony Caro, *Poison Chamber*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel. 209.5 × 118 × 78.5 cm

Anthony Caro, *Sacrifice*, from the *Last Judgement*, 1995–99, stoneware, jarrah wood and steel. 126 × 150 × 109 cm

some sort of ideal path, but merely growing and developing, getting more and more like himself.

The catalogue/book that accompanies the Last Judgement is a very distinguished affair, with exemplary texts, chosen with flair and erudition by John Spurling to clarify and comment on the subject matter of the different episodes. The book includes a poem by Hans Magnus Enzensberger; essays by Nadine Gardiner on art and politics, Robert Hind on human violence from the scientist's standpoint, Peter Baelz on art and morality, and an immensely knowledgeable and clear exposition by Philip Rylands, the art historian and keeper of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, of the various appearances through history of the Last Judgement and the Apocalypse in art from the Middle Ages on. The photographs in colour by David Buckland (who also photographed Caro's *Trojan War*) of every work in the sequence of sculptures, with some telling close-ups, are notably fine, dramatically but not luridly lit, and of exceptional clarity in definition. The Introduction by Anthony Caro to the book as a whole begins:

> The *Last Judgement* may seem different in character from most of my earlier sculpture, but the same sensibility is at work. Its rhythms are similar, it is a piece one walks through, the works reveal themselves from close up. Unlike most of my work which is a celebration of life through the language of sculpture, the *Last Judgement* makes a comment on social and political behaviour. Europe's history is thick with horrors. My *Last Judgement* is a response to present-day atrocities, although at the end it holds out some hope of a brighter future.
>
> Unlike the *Trojan War*, an earlier group which grew out of my immediate contact with ceramic clay, the idea of making a Last Judgement had been fermenting in my mind before I began the series. The stoneware parts were made in the ceramic studio of Hans Spinner in Grasse in 1996... After firing in the wood kiln the clay units were sent to London; in my studio there I slowly developed them into sculptures. I added steel and jarrah wood (old railway sleepers) as well as a few parts of oak and of concrete...
>
> The sculpture cannot be fully appreciated in what might be called 'art' terms. Most of my art can: this is why I've sometimes been called 'an artist's artist'. There's no right or wrong in this, the art is no more nor less human – it's simply whether the humanity comes through one channel or another...

The title of this essay is taken from a line by John Donne, 'What if this present were the world's last night', in one of his Holy Sonnets, quoted by John Spurling in his essay on the Last Judgement in the catalogue.

'Anthony Caro: The Last Judgement', until 7 November, Antichi Granai, Venice. Sponsored by the Würth Group, Italy, and Museum Würth, Germany. Presented in association with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Catalogue £20.

Craig Raine

From Palladio to Blueberry Pie

The cultural cringe of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen

In a way, the most exciting and convincing thing I saw in Venice was a piece of performance art by Bryan Robertson at breakfast. At the mention of Oldenburg, Bryan announced, 'Old grey dusty things. Every museum in America has an obligatory soft drum kit floppily collecting dust in a corner'. Whereupon, he sank like a soufflé into himself. The legendary Boneless Wonder. A puff ball suddenly short of puff.

The first sight of the Claes Oldenburg-Coosje van Bruggen exhibition in the Museo Correr is in Piazza San Marco as you approach from the Campanile end. From an upstairs window a yellow plastic rubbish-chute protrudes, one of those chains of sturdy builders' buckets. From it hangs a dark brown torrent of arrested dirt. Minutes before, I had been admiring the Pollock in a pizza. Thus prepared, I admired this radical, in-your-face mission statement – to refurbish the Museo Correr and rid it of its Renaissance rubbish. Or, if not a mission statement, a pre-emptive joke aimed at sceptics – that the exhibition itself was rubbish. (An equally plausible construction.)

But as I neared the installation, I realised that the apparent chain of buckets was not in fact telescopic. Their configuration was much more a segmented length of flexible pipe – a sewage outlet. So I stood underneath, pondering the feathered suspension of liquid shit. It swayed in the breeze like a layer-cut wig, or black and brown strips of seaweed, with its coiffure faintly suggestive of Henry V. Prompted maybe by the intimate connection between sewage and sea, I reflected that it could perhaps be intended to represent kelp or tangle (*laminaria digitata*) – that leonine seaweed. It was only the cover of the catalogue which alerted me to my misprision. Oldenburg and van Bruggen actually intended to represent a lion's tail – appropriately enough, given the winged lion's symbolic Venetian role. T S Eliot's famous Venice poem asks 'Who clipped the lion's wings, / And flea'd his rump and pared his claws?' Now we know. Guilt at my misinterpretation was mitigated by the catalogue's reproduction of Oldenburg's preparatory sketch (not in the exhibition), entitled *Broom*, in which the lion's tail is assimilated to a painter's brush, mopping up little dumps and droppings of pigment. So – back to shit again, by a Joycean 'commodius vicus of recirculation'.

My hermeneutical 'failure' prompts several arguable propositions relevant to the Oldenburg-van Bruggen project.

How much of their work is any good? How much is shit? (Bryan Robertson at breakfast again: 'some beautiful things and some over-inflated jokes'.) How much do the (comparatively rare) successes depend on the transfiguration of rubbish? – specifically, the detritus of American life, typically magnified by Oldenburg's signature suburban surrealism. How important is it that the iconic banality should be recognisable? How much delay in recognition

Claes Oldenburg, study for *Lion's Tail*, 1998, colour pen and pencil, 33 × 31.7 cm

is permissible? How much delay is desirable? Is multiplicity of interpretation an index of profundity? Or merely a s entimental and redundant tenet left over from the New Criticism? – namely, the idea, fostered by William Empson's confused, overrated and idolised *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, that the essence of poetry is ambiguity, that singleness and richness are incompatible, contradictory features. Clearly, Oldenburg's wife, the literary half of this partnership, Coosje van Bruggen, instinctively favours such a position.

In the irritating (because simultaneously transmitted) videos which accompany the exhibition, she presents herself as the writer and conceptual enricher in the relationship. She contributes to the 'thinking process' – adding complexity and commentary, believing that 'not one way but two ways [of interpretation] will make it [the art-work] last'. Thus, in *Spoonbridge and Cherry* (1988, Minneapolis) the spoon was Claes but the cherry was added by Coosje. (A straightforward enough female sexual reference and one insistent on equality, on balance. The cherry has a stalk, just like the masculine spoon.) And in the catalogue interview, van Bruggen is relaxed, not to say encouraging, about multiplicity of interpretation: 'while the work functions as the sign we intended it to be, at the same time members of the community bring their own interpretations to it'.

Which, of course, consoled me for my gaffe. On the other hand, given the only tenuous resemblance of their sculpture to a lion's (non-segmented) tail, perhaps I needed no reassuring: I could be confidently cock-eyed, since the mote on my retina was induced by the beam in theirs. In the exhibition itself, *Bottle of Notes* (1993) reinforced the idea of complication – is, indeed, a piece which is about the very meaning of meaning. It equates complexity with profundity. Such an equation is frequently true (especially in literature) but not *necessarily* true: it must take into consideration Eliot's opposing, higher valuation of 'A condition of simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)'. Profundity, of course, ensures that those vulnerable 'over-inflated jokes' are protected. Coosje van Bruggen is there to mitigate the flip side of Oldenburg. *Bottle of Notes* is a metal bottle consisting of words, of joined-up writing, coloured white – a continuum which contains further, *blue*, joined-up writing. The proverbial message in the bottle, therefore, is itself contained within a message. Form and content, that old circus act of Siamese twins, are with us once more. Wow. 'Explain what is *claritas* and you win the cigar', Lynch says to Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

This take on interpretation, however, so favoured by van Bruggen, actually runs contrary to the spirit of the very best Oldenburg. She favours *kinesis*, the idea of 'the unsettling beauty of the imperfect condition', things exploding, imploding, whereas Oldenburg seeks 'classical equilibrium' – 'I tend to think art has a kind of stasis to it'. And *he*, after all, is the artist, not she. What she *helps* him to is change – relief from the monstrous monotony of his basic methodology. Mere defamiliarisation is in itself no guarantee of artistic success. Think of successful defamiliarisation and think of, for example, Colette's inspirational transformations in her libretto for Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* – those shepherds and shepherdesses from the torn nursery wallpaper who lament their lost 'green sheep upon the mauve grass'. A witty and beautifully judged ironic pathos. Without Colette's taste and imagination, defamiliarisation isn't much more than a methodological cliché. It all depends on the how and the who. Oldenburg is over-confidently democratic when he says that 'essentially the use of an object, a simple object that people know from their own experience, is a radical act in itself. Almost any situation for such an object in a large scale is going to be a radical statement. You're not expected to monumentalise simple, ordinary things.'

Not unless you're Claes Oldenburg.

Claes Oldenburg, *Batcolumn*, 1977. Harold Washington Social Security Center, Chicago

Coosje van Bruggen has saved him somewhat from this artistic predictability. Without her, no *Dropped Bowl with Scattered Slices and Peels* (1990), no *Toppling Ladder with Spilling Paint* (1986). So her influence isn't entirely detrimental. But.. the merit of Oldenburg is inseparable from the monotony. The artefacts which *work* work in an orthodox Oldenburgian way. The fundamental key is given the spectator as he mounts the flight of stairs to the Museo Correr proper – given with a straightforward clarity that is avoided in the many obfuscations in the catalogue, on video and elsewhere. At the foot of the stairs, suspended above the viewer, are a pink arch, an off-white accordion of stairs, a green obelisk, a faded apricot pediment with two pillars (the right one a touch withered) – classical quotations, in other words, presented as soft furnishings, upholstered so that the steel zips were on view. Dunlopillars. This is partly an in-joke directed at Christo that just about wraps things up. More meaningfully, of course, it is a summoning of classicism – mildly tinged with irony and weightlessness only to avoid solemnity and ponderousness. An evocation and an invocation of classicism.

The best Oldenburgs do not merely indulge the automatic and reflex radicalism of incongruous scale, matching the monumental to the everyday – which would scarcely be an advance on the tedious predictability of René Magritte's outsize matches and combs. The best Oldenburgs discover a classical, Brancusi-like purity of line in the most mundane objects. Which is why, at the top of the Correr stairs, Oldenburg confronts us with two slices of all-American Blueberry pie wodged onto the balustrade balls. Europe and the New World – separated only by a flight of stairs.

The essential aesthetic journey to be undertaken is there from the bottom to the top – from Palladio to home-baked pie. And it has to be instant. This stereoscopy, bringing together the old and the new, is a question of identification, though. It isn't a simple matter of juxtaposition – as it often strives to be in the Oldenburg canon. What makes art more

Claes Oldenburg, *Dropped Bowl with Scattered Slices and Peels*, 1990. Miami

Claes Oldenburg, *Monument to the Last Horse*, 1991. Marfa, Texas

than merely conceptual – always – is the account that needs to be taken of the means. Brancusi's various *Birds in Space* are not uniformly good. Obviously, the broken and mended example in the Palazzo Guggenheim is significantly spoilt. Only one or two of the many versions actually work by creating the correct, impossible, but mastered, viable slenderness. Brancusi's several versions of *The Kiss* are by no means equal. Some are downright clumsy. One or two only are perfection. Oldenburg's output is even more uneven – though with notable successes which I will come to, as well as notable failures.

The root impulse in this deliberate conflation of contemporary and classical is political and patriotic, if not downright chauvinistic. To understand it, you need to consider the immediate post-war American imperium – a culture of surpassing vulgarity – of power and perceived aesthetic poverty, of Coca-Cola, of consumerism, of baked-bean baroque. Not even redeemed by a glorious barbarism, America was ketchup and kitsch. Pop Art's response was to brazen it out, to revel in it – to call it Art. Oldenburg's sophisticated, if belated, response is much more subtle – a cultural cringe. He collates the classical and the all-American cliché, by discovering beautiful design in the drearily everyday where, very occasionally, it is indubitably to be found. Consider the baseball bat – its shape as intrinsically elegant as the Indian exercise clubs that provided the model for Perrier bottles. The catalogue shows us photographs of bats fresh from the sports shop, mounted on plinths, and conceding nothing to the inevitabilities of the best Arps, and little to the best Brancusis, like *Fish* or *Little Bird II*. The found object meets the connoisseur of the concrete jungle, as Stanley met Livingstone. A chance in a million. Why?

Because most everyday objects are ugly – and, if they are, nothing will transform them, let alone the pathetically simple magic of enlargement. Enlarge a hideous dust-pan and brush, and you get an even uglier pan and brush – *Big Sweep* (1999). Or take Oldenburg's monumental *Saw, Sawing* (1996) which contrives to maximise the dime-store horror of the red plastic handle, while losing the extraordinary beauty conferred on the saw model by Oldenburg's instinctive taste. *Study for a Sculpture in the Form of a Saw, Cutting* (1973) is exquisite, constructed from cardboard with inner corrugation, a Batman cut-out of burnt ochre, sprayed silver for the top of the saw-blade. Oldenburg has sensed the beauty in the saw-shape, a beauty all but hidden by the utilitarian materials – the bulbous bright-red plastic, the raw metal screws, which have been fatally restored in the magnificent monument.

The baseball bat is a different case. Here the object requires no improvement, nothing but unprejudiced recognition of a beautiful shape. A shape that Oldenburg violates as he scales up the project, since he appears not to realise that the solidity of the baseball bat is nine-tenths of its charm. Instead of this matchless hardwood, perfectly turned, we are offered a woven *wicker-work* baseball bat, the size of a small skyscraper. Though constructed from steel, the thing is literally and aesthetically hollow. It is, in theory at least, hard to imagine how anyone could impair the classical beauty of the safety-pin – what Russians call an English pin – but Oldenburg contrives just that. How? By the simple expedient of having a metal pin whose width and grey colour look like pumped up plastic – so that *Corridor Pin* (1999) embodies as much conviction as an inflatable woman with puckered plastic seams. On the other hand, *Dream Pin, Clasp*, a safety-pin without the pin, affects one with the force of macabre Lewis Carroll, assisted, if anything, by the nastiness of the materials. The drawing study, curiously, has none of the menace that exudes from the finished sculpture.

This variation in quality control within a single subject is conspicuous in *Monument to the Last Horse* (1991), where a rusty horse shoe with nails laconically evokes the radical, idealised curve of a horse's neck. One nail *is* an ear. The feel of the thing is rather like those bronzes of Picasso done in the '30s from crude plaster or clay maquettes (for example, *Le Guerrier*, 1933). It isn't at all replication

Claes Oldenburg, *Saw. Sawing*, 1996. Tokyo, Japan

Claes Oldenburg, *Study for a Sculpture in the Form of a Saw Cutting*, 1973

Claes Oldenburg, *Flashlight* Final Model, 1979, 19.4 × 10.2 × 12.4 cm

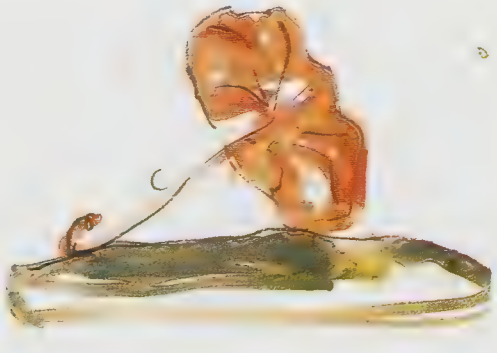
or representation – it is pure evocation, classical only in the straitened means employed. What is odd, however, is the failure of the preparatory drawings to capture any horsinesss at all – a fatal weakness common to nearly every 'realisation' of Oldenburg's idea, except the one named, *Monument to the Last Horse*.

The great, typical successes are *Flashlight, Final Model* (1980) and *Clothespin 45 Foot Version, Model* (1976–8). Here Oldenburg finds the indisputably classical in the everyday. The pieces are obvious and eternally surprising. Only an eye of genius could have seen them. But that eye's talent is intermittent. Or is it that art requires not only recognition but contrivance? The flashlight is a profound black and finely finned along its length – the switch suggested by only the faintest variant. Van Bruggen calls this 'an organic cactus-like form', a description that scarcely does justice to the finesse of the fins. The piece is exactly assimilated to the corduroy classical column and rests on its own circle of light. The equation is error-free and ungainsayable and gratifyingly impossible. One plus one is one. Orwell's doublethink redeemed in the aesthetic sphere. But *Flashlight* (1979) fails completely because it is small and – frankly – dumpy. Nor does *Flashlight Study for Final Version* (1979) work either because, although it, too, is ribbed, it is over-bulky at the bottom and has none of the ravishing balance of *Flashlight, Final Model* (1980). The idea, then, depends crucially on enhancement of the found object. Were those fins actually based on the muffled symmetries of a cactus, Flashlight, Final Model wouldn't work. That clothespin resembles the everyday object as Raquel Welch resembles the readers' wives in 'Your Bit'. Its legs are longer. More curvacious. They go right up to its armpits. Execution is everything.

And execution depends on the artist. Isn't something nearly always lost when the assistants and the factories are employed to realise large-scale projects? Is it heretical to suggest that Oldenburg's strength is more clearly visible in the drawings and models than the factory-finished monuments? In the Correr show, there are some lovely, delicate drawings. *Umbrella, Inscribed 'R. Crusoe'* (1977) is a shamelessly pretty drawing, of a red parasol on green grass, Japanese in its simplicity – a work that underlines the crudity of the large sculptural models of Crusoe's umbrella. Van Bruggen may multiply her spells as she wishes – insisting on 'the many associative images connected to this piece [*The Architect's Handkerchief*]' or insisting on the literary *lions* who have worked in Venice. But in the end, it is Oldenburg's eye which, for better, for worse, for richer and for simplification, is going to decide how this marriage of contemporary and classical will work out.

And those soft, floppy affairs from earlier? That was the first marriage. It didn't work out.

'Claes Oldenburg-Coosje van Bruggen', until 3 October, Correr Museum, Venice. Catalogue published by Skira, £45.



Claes Oldenburg, *Umbrella inscribed 'R. Crusoe'*, 1977, 28 × 34.9 cm

Tom Lubbock

Colour Stories

Art's big mystery? – or just a question of artspeak?

In front of the American pavilion in the Giardini in Venice, Anne Hamilton was at the microphone, talking about *Myein*, her sound/pigment/braille-text installation, and saying that the best way she could introduce it would be to address the most asked question about it: the coloured pigment that filtered down the walls of each room from top to bottom – why that pink? And she said she had picked it because it was a colour without a name, a colour that was marginal, unplaceable, excessive, seductive and a little disquieting – though also a colour that a friend of hers had told her was 'the navy blue of India'.

Actually, the pink in question does have a name. For, as the saying usually goes: 'shocking pink is the navy blue of India'. Colours often have weird names, sometimes strongly opinionated ones. German identifies a hue as *Giftgrün* – 'poison green'. And our 'shocking pink' seems to declare we do find something extreme in the colour. On the other hand, if the saying is true, it would seem that this shockingness is a culturally variable thing.

Meanwhile, over at the British pavilion, the British Council was handing out the Gary Hume catalogue, which had an essay by David Batchelor in it. And it seemed that what Hamilton felt about shocking pink, Batchelor felt about colour as such. He wrote:

> Colour is uncontainable. It effortlessly reveals the limits of language and evades our best attempts to impose a rational order upon it... To work with colour is to become acutely aware of the insufficiency of language and theory – which is both disturbing and pleasurable...

People often go overboard about colour, and there seem to be some jumped conclusions here. Colour may be hard to describe, but that needn't make it – as 'uncontainable' implies – an uncontrollable, anarchic force. Nor – which seems to be implied too – is colour's pleasurableness part and parcel of its indescribability. And both these presumptions add up to a critical doctrine that I'd like to resist.

This doctrine would see colour as the peculiarly free element in art, the thing that doesn't have a meaning and can't have, that exceeds meaning and disrupts meaning, and is thus by far the best bit. I put it in a rather Roland Barthes-ish way, but the general idea has long appealed to those who want to hold art's ground against the encroachments of 'literature'; they also put their faith in colour as art's big mystery, the one thing the critics can't get their hands on.

My own feeling is that colour criticism may not be a much more elusive or tricky undertaking than art criticism generally. At any rate, it isn't to be separated from it. A picture's colour mustn't be preserved in ineffability through gratuitous isolation. Its colour should be taken in conjunction with all the picture's other elements. Sure, many of the specific ways colour has been articulated by critics are questionable: arbitrary, vague, impressionistic, capricious. So let's put some examples to the question. The best way to see what can be said about colour in pictures is to see what has been said – the more specific and particular the criticism, the better – and what sort of sense can be made of it.

But here there is a problem. The critics seem mainly to be in the ineffability camp. If they don't regard colour criticism as strictly taboo, they certainly see it as a work of supererogation – nice idea, but nobody need feel obliged. At least, trawling for this article in a scattered but voracious way, I didn't come across many examples of the sort of colour criticism I was looking for. In fact, it was curious to see how often a book of art criticism could proceed from start to finish as if its subject-matter were all in black and white. No names, and I'm noone to talk. I practically never mention colour myself. And no doubt I've missed some obvious and excellent examples. But reading, for instance, John Gage's recent investigation, *Colour and Meaning*, which delves so much into the articulation of colour, it was surprising to find so little attention given to art-critical interpretation. Perhaps he thinks it's mostly rubbish. Or perhaps he didn't find much either.

There was this citation, however, from the German 'Colour Historian' Lorenz Dittmann: a long, virtuosic description of the colour in Millet's Gleaners. The painting, Dittman says,

> is dominated by a muted brightness with a brownish and grey-violet undertone. The sky appears tinged with a tender violet, as it were a mixture of the two most evident hues in the picture: the very dull grey-blue and copper-red tones in the headscarves of the bending peasant-women. In the white sleeve of the central figure the light gathers with a 'filtered' effect. The unusually restrained colours (which seem to contradict the monumental forms) follow a closely stepped sequence: reddish tones in the central figure, based around copper-reddish, brownish and bright carmine; delicate nuances of colourful greys in the standing figure to the right: silvery bright blue-grey, dove grey, blue and turquoise greys. The colour-thresholds are kept so low that induction effects are made much easier, which allows the colour tones to appear as 'resonances'... (From *Colour Structure and Colour Theory in Western Painting*, 1987.)

John Gage calls this sort of passage a 'plum', liable to become 'indigestible'. Dittmann's technical terms – induction, threshold – are strange to me, but I expect they mean something. His leisurely precisions are lulling but attractive. The trouble, I think, is the way the passage tacks continually on the brink of interpretation, but never jumps. And its single gesture in that direction I don't understand: 'restrained colours (which seem to contradict the monumental forms)'. Why?

The opposite, surely. The muted colours affirm the monumentality. For one thing, they tend to greys, and thus give the figures a hint of statue-stone (a common colour device: the re-tuning of colours for some metaphorical purpose). For another, it may be that the very sense of the colours being *restrained* is itself a metaphorical effect – this restraint picking up on the grave, measured action of the figures, and on (say) the way the right-hand woman, as she stoops, is restrained, held down, by the horizon

Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas, 83.8 × 111.8 cm, Musée du Louvre

line, which lies like a beam on her shoulders. And since the sense of colour restraint is something one feels about the picture as a whole, the figures' demeanour is echoed in the picture as a whole. So colour can not only focus figurative meanings, but also (so to speak) spread them around.

Now, one might simply have said: 'the whole mood of the picture is restrained'. Yes; and what I'm trying to show is that such a remark, if spelled out as above, isn't elusively moody. It just involves making a metaphor of the observation that the colour is restrained. Of course, one could analyse that observation, and call it a complex and relative judgement. But still it wouldn't seem capriciously subjective. And a useful question would be: what further, comparable colour-scheme metaphors are there – not restraint but...?

Dittmann makes another promising remark at the start of the piece: 'The sky appears tinged with a tender violet, as it were a mixture of the two most evident hues in the picture: the very dull grey-blue and copper-red tones in the headscarves...' It's not the tenderness but the mixture that promises. It promises perhaps a reading like this one, of the choir of angels in Piero's *Nativity*, by Adrian Stokes:

> The crimson triangle of under-robe visible at the neck of the back angel on the right, if taken with the light blue robe of the contiguous front angel and its purplish shadows, would roughly equal in colour the purple-blue of the centre angel. Thus, as the centre of this miraculous group she augments it without herself taking precedence. (*Colour & Form*, 1937.)

Stokes as a critic is a great chancer. He has a go, and invariably suggests something useful, if not in the particular case strictly true. It's not certain that the mixtures here would work out as he describes. And I don't quite understand what this augmentation-without-precedence thing is – what about the unmentioned angel in white on the group's left, doesn't he have a big place in any colour story? And I wonder how Stokes would interpret the mixture-effect as it affected, not relations among a group of figures, but the relations, as in *The Gleaners*, between sky and the two heads? (Actually, one can sort of guess how, from a passage I'll quote a bit later.) But the general thought, the use of two colours and their mixture as a metaphorical resource, is worth holding onto. Obviously a mixture metaphor could play various ways, suggest many kinds of relationship, and that's a looseness. But again, the perception it's based on isn't likely to be called subjective.

I could have filled this whole piece with samples of Bridget Riley's colour criticism, but I'll take just one. It comes from her lecture, 'Colour for the Painter' (1995), unfortunately not included in the recent collection of her writings. I often don't feel sure quite what Riley is driving at. She can sound, sometimes, as if she thought integration and cohesion were the whole business of art, with colour as the great binding agent. Yet her observations come with a patient intensity which seems to assume larger (though not to be stated) significances – as here, looking at Vermeer's *Milkmaid*. She has just identified two colour themes in the picture, a yellow and a blue:

> Take the yellow theme: from the bodice it lights up the inside of her cap as a luminous shadow, continues up the shadowed wall, including the brass object and the wicker basket, growing as it goes warmer and stronger until it reaches a dull orange in the top left corner. The shadowed side of her bodice is also turned towards orange. Likewise the shadowed side of her face and cap. It becomes stronger in the shadows under her forearms and turns into a heavy red-orange in the pitcher and vessel into which the milk is poured. It turns cooler and lighter again in the golden ochres of the bread and its basket.
>
> The blue movement shows its deepest and strongest note in the shadowed apron and grows lighter in the table cover and the cloth lying across it – one a cooler slightly turquoise version, the other a warmer, more violet tone, respectively. It appears as both light and dark in the decorated jug and cover standing on the table, turns into the cool reflected light in the shadow beneath the window, and in the lightest and freshest of all possible inflections accounts for the

Jan Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, 1658–60, oil on canvas, 45.5 × 41 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Pieter Brueghel, *The Harvesters*, 1565, oil on canvas, 118 160.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum, New York

> Four of the figures ... feed on milk soup from wooden bowls. Note how the action of this feeding is interpreted by the disposition of white forms. The old woman facing us ... has a white linen wrap over her hair. She ... has not begun to eat. The idea of white soup is in (on) her head, and such nourishment as may be hers will spin another thinking cap rather than add demonstrably to her physical strength. In direct contrast is the boy who with bowl in both hands drinks his soup down, pours it into himself. We feel the movement strongly because around his stomach and thighs white re-emerges in the shape of knickers... The other old lady, who dips her spoon into a vast wooden bowl, enjoys her milk soup: it will cause her to be loquacious. A white linen cloth covers her ears. (*Colour and Form* again.)

> colour of the daylight as it falls across the plain white wall behind.

The observation here seems perfectly true and *à propos*. This is how the picture's colours behave – though I think I would align the milk-jug and pot, along with the woman's cheeks, arms and underskirt, in a minor but separate red theme. And what's striking in Riley's thematic description is that it points not just to an order but to a process: it identifies a subject colour and observes it going through changes. The blue and the yellow circulate, modulate, disperse. It is tempting to compare the process to diffusion or evaporation. And since the two colours are established most strongly in the person of the woman, it is her that they diffuse. In short, one thing that Riley's description provides is a very full gloss of some such critical remark as 'The woman's presence seems to pervade the room'. Anyone might say that. Riley shows why.

One could take this further. For instance, Riley's approach makes it easier to say why the *Milkmaid*, though she pervades her space, isn't so absorbed into it as – nearby in the Rijksmuseum – the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* is. In that picture again, you can follow a blue and a yellow theme, but you find the range of modulation/diffusion in both is much narrower; the atmosphere is 'closer'. What's more, the colours of the *Woman in Blue* really are two-track. There is no red sub-theme. And what this red sub-theme does in the *Milkmaid* is to counter the diffusive action of the blue and the yellow, to preserve the woman's identity, by holding onto her body and immediate hand-work – flesh, underskirt, milk-jug and bowl – and not circulating round the room, except the floor she stands on.

So could one take this further still, beyond diffusion effects? I've just hinted a way it might go – making each of the colour themes equate to some moral-existential nexus. The red theme looks a promising start: the woman's body, her work, her clay pots, her ground. That would be a good, earthy colour story, and not just following but extending and inflecting the figurative agenda. All right – and the blue theme? Over-skirt, blue jug, tiles, light on wall... anything coming together? The blue (like the yellow) establishes a general, non-specific sense of connection. But does it connect according to any particular agenda? Is there anything more to its choice of objects other than a naturalistic opportunism – using such objects as can plausibly be made more or less blue? Could we find some ulterior purpose, such as Adrian Stokes finds in the white theme in the foreground of Brueghel's *Harvesters*?

Hmm. Stokes seems to be operating here on a principle that is both extraordinarily literal-minded and completely permissive. The principle is that colour similarity or sameness create a (perhaps otherwise hidden) bit of story. In a picture, two things, which are different sorts of thing, are the same colour: given what those things are, think of some connection – any, every, connection – between them. So the soup is white. The woman has a white scarf. She is thinking of the soup. The white soup will be good for her brain. Then again, perhaps she is worried about the soup. And rightly – for the soup will send her mad.

As it appears, in this passage, to have sent Stokes. But his willingness to say the daft and tactless thing is again useful. Anyone might say: the arrangement of like colours in this picture is somehow significant. Stokes finds a way to say precisely how it signifies. But it is absurd. So what would be a better way of putting it? 'Note how the action of this feeding is interpreted by the disposition of white

Paul Cézanne, *The Black Clock*, 1867, oil on canvas, 55 74 cm. Private Collection

forms.' Could the disposition of colours be shown to interpret the picture's action in a way that was more sensible? Or is the disposition itself (in these terms) hopelessly unsensible?

Pictures have all sorts of such dispositions – colour-effects which look like potential metaphors or tropes. In the examples so far, the operative effects haven't themselves been too dubious. A sense of restraint; mixture; diffusion; sameness: of course, one could argue about these things, but still feel one was talking about something solid. The problem is their operation, how these effects might 'interpret', directly or indirectly, strictly or broadly, the picture's figurative content. But in the examples that follow, the colour effects themselves seem more questionable, just because they are already an interpretation.

In one of his *Letters on Cézanne* (1907) Rainer Maria Rilke tells the colour story of an early still-life, *The Black Clock*. It is another way of talking colour. In Riley you may find *emphasises, leads to, emerges from, throws into contrast, echoes* used to describe the relationships between colours. But in Rilke – well, I have put the relevant words and phrases in bold:

> **Brightly confronting** each other on the white cloth are a coffee cup with a heavy dark-blue stripe on the edge, a fresh ripe lemon, a cut crystal chalice with a sharply scalloped edge, and, way over on the left, a large baroque triton's shell ... with its smooth, red orifice facing the front. Its inward carmine bulging out into brightness **provokes** the wall behind it into a kind of thunderstorm blue, which is then repeated, more deeply and spaciously, by the adjoining gold-framed mantle-piece; here, in the mirror image, **it again meets with a contradiction**: the milky rose of a glass vase which, standing on the black chimney clock, **asserts its contrast** twice (first in reality, then a **little more yieldingly** in reflection)...

No gradually unfolding themes, but a drama – a drama of assertion and counter-assertion. The description is confidently animating, psychologising, anthropomorphic. And Rilke's scenario is definitely eventful too; not just confrontations, actions that happen in a certain order. But the heroes of this action, the subjects of this animation, are not quite stable. Sometimes it's the objects depicted, but sometimes it's just the colours. The carmine provokes the wall. In other words, this description is not just an emotive response, though it may be that; it actually modifies the figurative content of the picture, or at least breaks a category barrier. The colours animate and become protagonists themselves, in communication with the cups and shells. (Compare, though it's not quite the same, Riley on Titian's *Bacchus*: 'The sheer volume of blue, and *what a blue*!... He uses the complexity of his narrative to balance the blue.' – From 'The Colour Connection', 1989.)

Or so it appears. But Rilke brings this off by not spelling out the whole drama. The meeting of the carmine and the blue may be explosive. But if you ask why it's the red that provokes and the blue that's the reaction, not the other way round, I think the reason is figurative, and obvious. What makes the carmine act is what it depicts. The intense red, sexually provocative lips of the shell, that's what causes the 'thunderstorm'. Rilke almost says it, but it would spoil his colour story if he said it too explicitly.

Patrick Heron, *Pale Pink and Lemon Painting*, 1982–84, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 121.9 cm. Private Collection

Now take some Lawrence Gowing, in his *Matisse* (1979). This is a tricky bit of criticism, Gowing's language is so rich and vague. The picture is Matisse's *Nymph and Satyr*.

> Its real vigour ... arises from an exact balance between the pinkness of the flesh and the bright grass-green that surrounds it everywhere. The pink **generates** its own red contour and the optical florescence makes the line strangely graphic and mobile. The colours **vibrate together as if physically** ... Matisse was working systematically towards the most exact **adjustment** of colour and **form** that modern painting had achieved, which meant for him colour and **physique** – an adjustment between colour and that **real, human zone in which action is excited and suspended**.

Spit it out, cock! The form, which is physique, which is that real human zone... But one can say roughly what he's on about: painting and sex. And the subject of the picture – a naked man about to jump on a naked woman – is more present here than perhaps it seems. *Generates* might suggest the red contour was an optical effect, but it is really there, outlining both bodies; the red contour is as if generated. *Vibrate together as if physically* means, I suppose, like when you put your hand on an engine. Gowing's central (if buried) point is that two colours meeting can bring their edge alive, make it zing and quiver; and that this can analogise the yearning of desiring flesh (with added reddening for emphasis). Colour does desire like nothing else. But I think Gowing would say that this pink-green wasn't desirous by itself. You need the pink depicted bodies for it to be felt.

Of course, colours hardly ever appear in a picture just as colours. They usually have bodies of a sort: shapes and sizes and textures. And even the most minimal figuration can be made to go a long way – as in, a final extravaganza, Alan Gouk's commentary on Patrick Heron's *Pale Pink and Lemon Painting: November 1982-May 28 1984*:

> On the right, a **frank** and fluffy whitish pink **bids fair to smother** a lemon cup-wafer, while to the left, an ornamental blur of magenta and mauve, with a maze of scorings from the tube, **stops short** of raw-white almond containing a loose flurry of cadmium yellow tube-and-brush twirling. Just when it begins to seem that the pink runs the risk of bleaching out too pale, avert one's eyes for an instant, and up it comes again, perfectly **blushing** at the **discrete** lemon wafer's **sharply whispered suggestion, and a louder, naughtier importunity** from a fluttering flaglet of deep red, almost too **stark an intrusion**, yet not, **like an attempt to shape some notation for an as yet unformulated emotion which only the finished painting will provide**...

But, though I haven't space to go through every sally, I don't think it's complete nonsense. Again, what sounds like a pure colour drama in the critic's head is really justified by a figurative(-ish) agenda. These are a few examples of colour making pictorial meaning, in ways neither outside the artist's control nor beyond the viewer's ken. I expect they only scratch the surface. □

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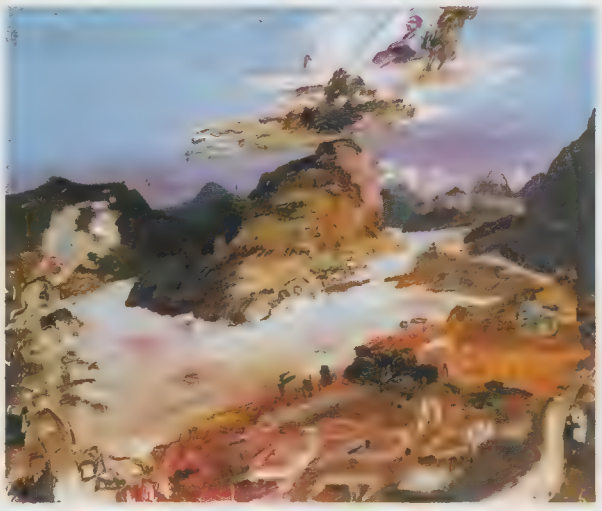

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This Wonderful Exile of the Artist

A discussion on the nature and rôle of drawing

Merlin James Practically speaking, drawing is the easiest kind of art to make, requiring the least tools, materials, preparation. But artists so often find it an effort – something they keep meaning to get around to (back to), do more of. The very simplicity is a psychological barrier and a test. It requires a difficult humility.

Joe Fyfe Well, what is a drawing? It's not the same, necessarily, as a 'study', a 'sketch', or a 'work on paper' even.

James Hyde Isn't drawing defined by the very act of defining? A set of marks that manages to recoup intention, or at least the atmosphere of intention? Painting seems to me to emphasise presence: making the thing present. Drawing, in contrast, is direction. Plans, projections, descriptions, indications.

JF A drawing is not a thing in the world. A drawing is propositional, a question, a 'what if?'. Robert Smithson's drawings don't seem like drawings as such to me. They are sculptures, like Lawrence Weiner's *An object tossed from one country to another* is a sculpture. Both those artists are using a non-sculptural medium – drawing, and words – to create sculpture. But when Billy Wilder writes a note to himself on a scrap of paper, 'Silent picture star commits murder. When they arrest her she sees the newsreel cameras and thinks she's back in the movies' (and that becomes *Sunset Boulevard*) – that seems like a drawing to me. Ideational notation. Even if he wrote it after he finished the movie, it's still a drawing. Hopper's 'preparatory' drawings were done after the paintings. We are artificers; drawings don't have to be authentic propositions.

MJ Drawing seems to have a paradoxical implication of invention (fiction) *and* of description (fact) – both at once. But one thing that fascinates me is the very way it shows up this arbitrariness of how we divide up art – creative activity – into categories. We say, this is a drawing, this is a painting, because this is on paper, that on canvas, or whatever. We often say this (drawing) is a lesser thing than that (painting, sculpture) – it's a preparation, a study towards something, a sketch, and so on. And although they're often misleading (lots of drawings are better than lots of paintings or sculptures, and don't clutter up the world so much), I wouldn't decry these arbitrary, conventional divisions. The enduring fascination is the very fact that they have come to be – that humans have decided there is something called drawing.

JH An artist friend of mine recently returned from Thailand, where there is a program training elephants to paint.

MJ It features in the Venice Biennale this year.

JH It's the artists Komar and Melamid who sponsor it. With the Thai economic collapse, the boys who handle the elephants have been reduced to begging. They are given materials and the elephant marks the canvas. Then the 'drawings' are sold. But who is the real artist there? The boys, who have an intimate bond with their animal, or the sponsors, or the elephants?

MJ Well, that puts the question philosophically, but it's a little like the Sherry Levine copies of Matisse or de Kooning drawings – it's not that interesting to me, because it distils the theoretical question so purely. In good art those questions are embedded in a much more messy, rich, complex performance.

JH I haven't seen the elephant drawings, but my friend said some were very varied and beautiful. The question of authorship aside – and of course the politics are fine – what I really like is the imagery: using an elephant as a drawing tool instead of as a subject! And coming from that looping proboscis, these works have to be drawings, not paintings. Drawing is a following of the outline.

JF Martin Kippenberger's drawings on hotel stationery, or Bonnard's drawings on his daily calendar – there is this sense of futility, this counting out of days, of places, of weather, this wonderful exile of the artist. Or Degas – or Polke – mixing up painting and photography in their drawings. They ask the question, and resolve themselves formally just as the question is being asked.

JH But there's something else a drawing does. It takes that exile, even that exoticism, and brings it back home.

MJ Jim, you have a drawing by Morandi which embodies something about line. The way 'outline' drawing mimes a certain kind of experience of things in which

Albrecht Dürer, *Hands of an Apostle*, 1508

we see something 'as' something else – a shape, a conceptualised contour – and then, at the moment when our consciousness flips back from that to a realisation of the 'real' object – the 'thing itself' – at that moment we are given the object somehow more fully, more richly. Our awareness of the presence of the thing is renewed, revitalised, by this little displacement, or this contrast with an abstracted conception of it.

JH There's a latency, an unfinishedness. Is a drawing ever finished? Perhaps that's when they become illustration. The most famous drawings, fixed as they are in our memory bank – Dürer's praying hands, da Vinci's proportional man – they retain an unfinished quality.

JF And intimacy. Even in Pollock or de Kooning, who most conflate drawing and painting, there is still greater intimacy in their drawings. Why?

MJ The kinds of movement one makes when one draws something mime the kinds of movements one would make to feel it, stroke it, examine it by touch if one's eyes were closed. That's not so true of painting it. Even less true of photographing it, obviously. Only modelling in clay would be more like a haptic, tactile contact with the thing itself. The act of drawing an image also somehow implies a taking possession and a putting of an image into a storage 'mode' from which it can be retrieved, having become the artist's own. It's not like storing a photograph. If you've drawn it, somehow you've turned it into your own substance.

JF And I like the comment of Louise Bourgeois that all her drawings were made for pleasure.

MJ As opposed to the old idea of drawing as a solid training for an artist, like practising scales for a musician? Drawing's been held at times to be the foundation, the 'basis' and credence of art. If you could do it well, then maybe you could go on to avant-garde improvisation which would be informed by that discipline. Now that may be dubious (I don't think artists *have* to draw, there are no drawings, really, by Vermeer, Soutine, Chardin; few by Courbet), but it's true there is often something in drawing that gives an artist away.

JF Like a 'tell' in poker. I wasn't impressed by Donald Sultan, Karen Finley or Tracy Emin, until I saw their drawings, which told me they held a strong hand. Then drawing shows some artists at their worst – Jasper Johns tends to illustrate, Joel Shapiro to decorate, Hockney to be pious.

MJ I think in Beuys it's in his drawings you see the phoniness in him, or the sort of hocus-pocus.

L S Lowry, *Figures over a Colliery Railway*, *c.* 1957

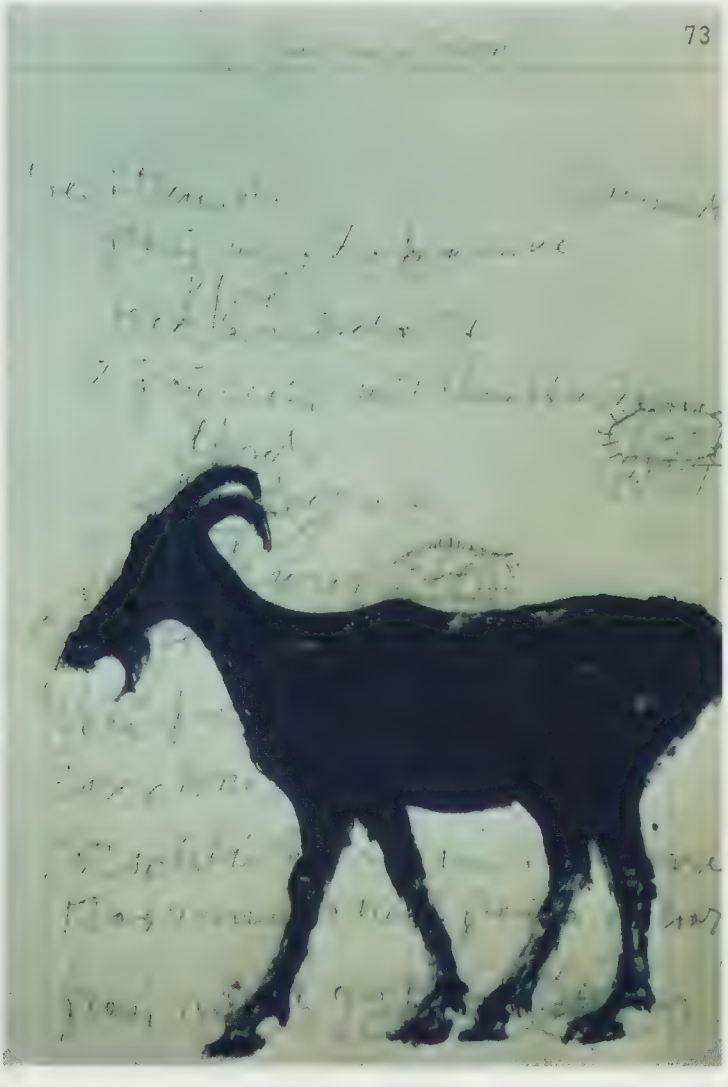
JF Ah, something to disagree on! Those Beuys drawings are amazing.

MJ I'm not discounting them necessarily. There's been a show of them at the Royal Academy in London. It's certainly his drawings that are most interesting to me in his work, because there he enters an arena and can be compared to other artists. But that's what shows up the evasive nature of his art. He doesn't really want to engage with precedents and perform in a known arena. He wants to be this amazing individual whose products are valuable simply because they're by him.

JF They are boring – just glancing around a room full of those little fucking framed things is exhausting. But they're ambitious. It's like he was trying to capture the most fleeting of his thoughts, the lint drifting through his mind if you will. And a terrific influence on younger German artists. A lot of their drawings are intelligently nuanced, and seemingly spun out of nothing – like good jazz.

MJ Sure, a drawing can be quick enough that you forget doing it, so then you can rediscover a drawing of your own and be surprised at it, even an hour after doing it. But drawing also connects you. It really puts you in with art history – sink or swim. Good draw-ers of the twentieth century: Lowry (UK), Hélion (France), Lindner (USA), you can put their drawings next to Watteau's or Holbein's and make a meaningful comparison. I can't quite feel that with Beuys.

JH But a roomful of any drawings can be deadly. The beautifully intimate can always become quickly tiring. For drawing to maintain its virtue, it needs to keep a sense of the disposable as well as the projectural. In these basic pictural urges – the primal impulse to mark, the propositional urge – drawing has a link to origin that is miles from a sense of the 'canon'. When I was eight I began



Joseph Beuys,

1959, oil colour, pencil, 29.7 × 20.7 cm. Marx Collection, Berlin
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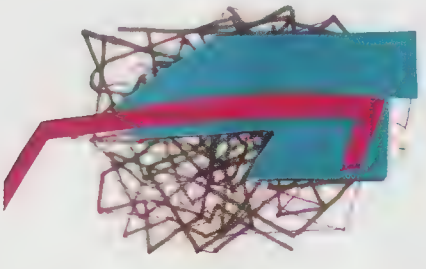


[illegible] drawing, 1999, 11.4 × 17.7 cm

Joe Fyfe, drawing, 1999, 20.9 × 20.3 cm

drawing with a friend. The gratification was immediate, and unlike other play there were palpable results.

JF Yes, drawing when I was eight or so was heaven. A friend and I would do collaborative drawings on large sheets of brown paper – sea battles. It was the Age of the Side View: cross sections with submarines below, airplanes above. In Third Grade, I did dragsters, with nice round wheels drawn around coins – a dime for the front, a quarter for the rear. This was on Staten Island in the early '60s. A 'beatnik' gave children's art classes on a Saturday at the Community Centre, and my sisters came home having learned to rub pastels to make flesh, but I wasn't interested in learning. I had enough coming out of my head to keep me busy. Only when I got to college I drew from life – by then I wanted to know how to do it.

MJ Yes, we are not making children's drawings still, nor just throw-away notations, much as we might use qualities from these. Aren't we trying to make drawings that individuate and distinguish themselves as works? That sustain, and *don't* become boring?

JH Well, my childhood drawing friend could draw 'properly' too, long strings of confident lines without correction. This I wanted to do, but always stumbled into 'sketching', with a smudge of corrections. To this day, much as I admire the perfect line in an Ingres – or a Keith Haring – my own drawing is by necessity something else.

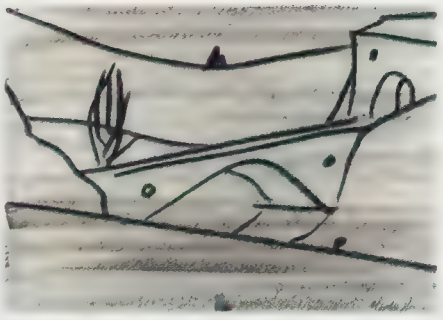
JF There's a difference between the way Matisse will address drawing on its own terms, i.e. 'I will make a line drawing, a charcoal drawing, a brush drawing...', meeting the materials half way like the Chinese poet-painters, and the way Picasso always wants to suborn the materials to his desire.

MJ But both aspire to virtuosity of some kind.

JH Do you know the Terry Allen song *The Beautiful Waitress*?

MJ Where he tells her he's an artist, and she says she can't draw a straight line.

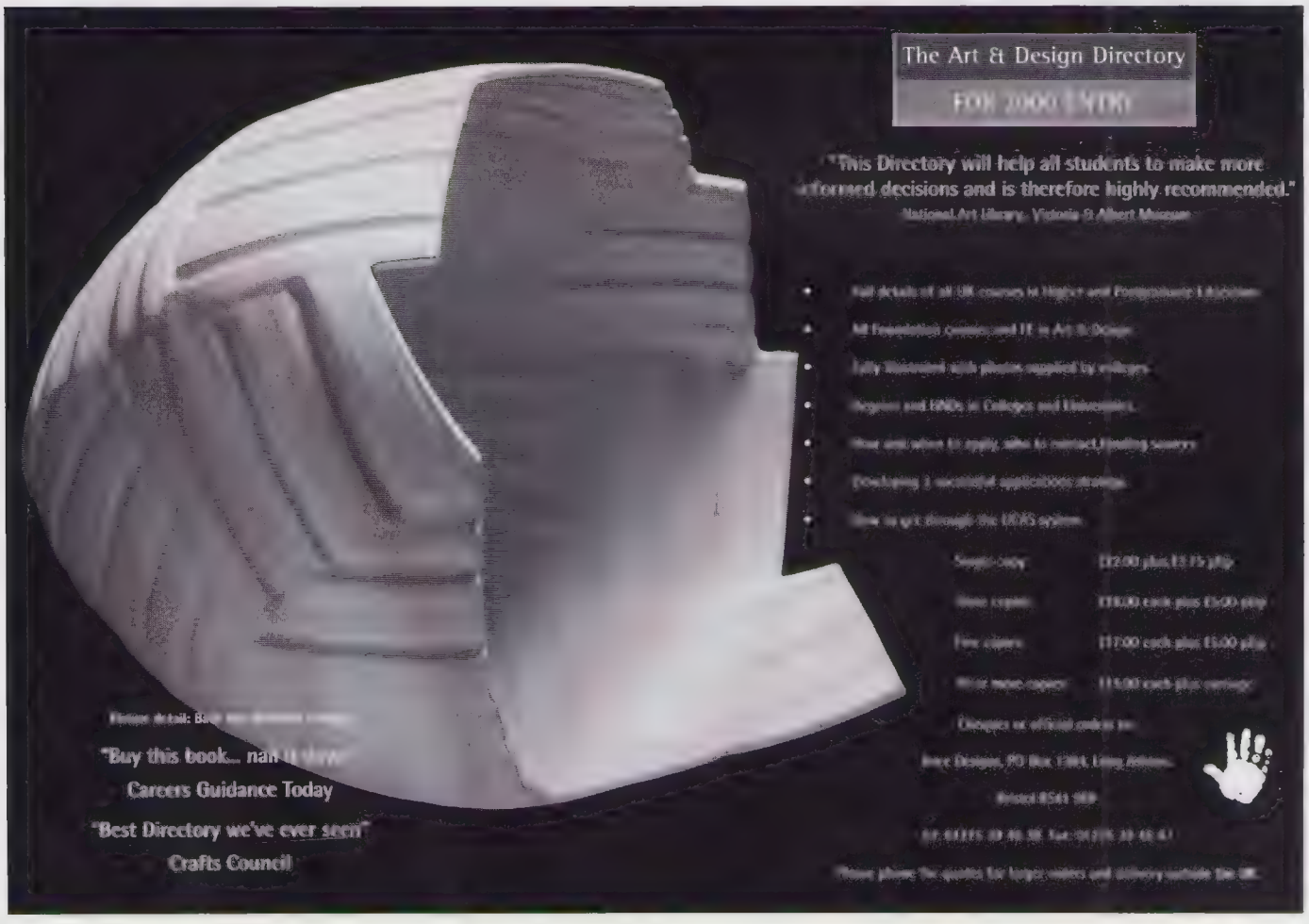
JH 'I told her if she could reach for something and pick it up, she could draw a line that was straight enough.' But she wants to draw horses... 'she could do the body OK, but never get the head, tails or legs. I told her she was drawing sausages not horses. She said no, horses'.



Merlin James, *Bridge*, 1999, crayon, 21 × 29 cm

'Drawings by Joe Fyfe, James Hyde, Merlin James', 15 November–4 December, Thomas Korzelius Fine Art, New York.

James Hyde and Joe Fyfe exhibit in New York at Brent Sikkema and Nicholas Davies respectively.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Assaulting Modern Art

Eric Hobsbawm: a rebuttal

Norbert Lynton

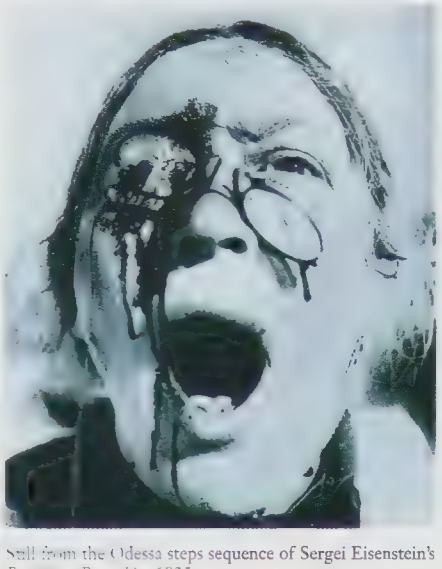
I was shocked to read Eric Hobsbawm's lecture on modern art, but not surprised. Professor Hobsbawm is, of course, the great Marxist historian, in his eighties now and going strong. His book 'The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991', entitled *Age of Extremes*, first published in 1994, has become a best-seller in paperback. Rightly so: he has to use a broad brush to display the pattern of our time, but it is a brilliant performance. Of course, specialists would want to challenge this or that detail. Worth noting are the two places in it where personal enthusiasm shines through his dense account of cultural matters: when he speaks of film and of jazz.

In 1946 he was one of my tutors at Birkbeck where I had gone to read History, English and that third subject I picked at random for my tripartite 'BA General' course (no longer available, alas), History of Art. He was in his first lecturing job; I, ten years younger, was straight from school and had an office day-job. He was exciting, incisive, *parti-pris*. Duller history tutors warned me against him. He gave me the best mark and comment for an essay I got from anybody. I admired him then and I admire him now, but not for this one foolishness.

I am not surprised, because the game of trashing things you know little about, and evidently never cared for, is flavour of the decade. There was George Walden giving a Peter Fuller Memorial lecture at University College, with the Slade School of Fine Art as, I suspect, his reluctant host, telling us what a con everything is these days, especially art. There, in the *Independent on Sunday*, is Gilbert Adair, the film critic, delivering weekly attacks on 'twentieth-century classics that won't last': Le Corbusier, Ben Nicholson, Erik Satie have stayed in my mind, and just recently Bernard Shaw. No doubt Adair proposed the series and his then editor assumed readers would love it. Most of what Adair writes in them is schoolboy abuse. Typical is his observation that 'No teenager has ever sported a Bernard Shaw T-shirt' and his entertaining anecdote about being asked by an American whether Bernard Shaw might be related to George Bernard Shaw. He is often wrong, both superficially and radically. Thus he says Nicholson got his white reliefs from Malevich's white paintings. Nicholson didn't and couldn't have. More important: if Adair had looked at these things he'd know they were almost wholly different. Absolutely important: he implies that artists shouldn't take ideas from other artists. Does he assess films this way?

People tell me such things are *jeux d'esprit*: I shouldn't take them so seriously. I wouldn't, were modern art, any art really, valued or at least sensibly considered and discussed in public. I see and hear self-blinkering scribblers leading the blind. Those of little faith have it wiped out for them by those proud to have none. It is difficult enough to engage with art amid the hubbub, but why yield the stage, the mike, the column to those who give no evidence of being interested in it except as something to stamp on? Using these methods we could all trash Michelangelo, Mozart and Milton. Perhaps they are next in line, or might people find that not amusing? Meanwhile, in the *TLS*, we have David Schiff caning Anton Webern for causing an American professor to write an obscurely analytical account of his music.

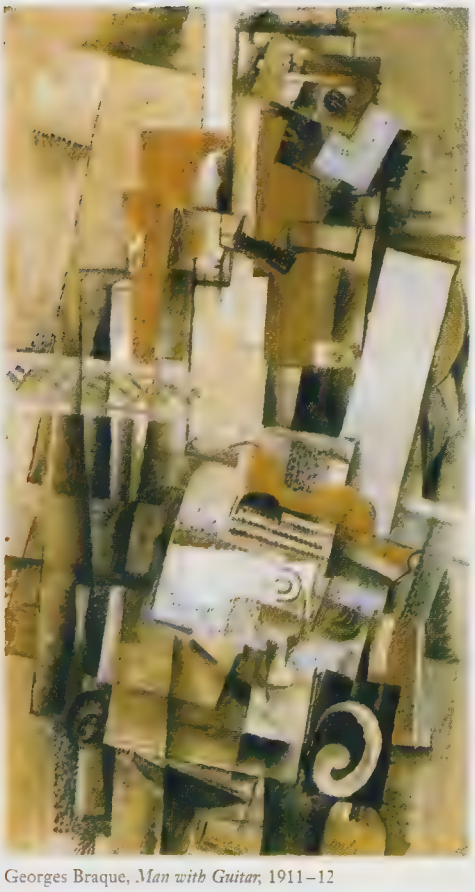
Hobsbawm's title for what is now an illustrated essay is *Behind the Times*. There's a subtitle, also printed in caps: *The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Gardes*. That is clearer but not what he is on about. I wouldn't much mind what he said about the movements, tendencies and groups that modern art became public as. They were misleading from the start, and those we still refer to distort our view of what was done. Hobsbawm is saying that modern painting has not changed enough to lead, nor even to reflect, our perception of the world after promising that it would. In his view painting and sculpture have made the least contribution to 'typical twentieth-century cultural experience, from grand opera at one pole to film, video and rock concert at the other'. Sculpture he sets aside, 'reluctantly'. Easel painting has failed our century because it is static, because it is not produced collectively, and because it is available only to the few. This is picking on the kid in the playground that everyone else is bullying too – which makes his task easier but also unnecessary.



Still from the Odessa steps sequence of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925

Even then, he misses his target. It is difficult to speak of paintings without making 'aesthetic judgments'; Hobsbawm foreswears these but stumbles into them, always revealing his inexperience. A specific charge is that (easel) painting has not kept up with advancing technology. Well, painters have used and made all sorts of newfangled things, from taking prints off naked women to using sprayguns or computers. Perhaps Hobsbawm will befriend art when it appears exclusively on screens. He ignores the other forms that have been developed, often by painters out of painting, so those who engage most directly with technology don't count. This exclusion also makes it easier for him to decry painting as a 'minority interest'. More people watch television than visit art galleries, he says, and these 'presumably [see] films or their equivalents regularly', film being 'the central art of the twentieth century'. Hands up, anyone who doesn't think film tremendously important and sometimes magnificent. (Many more people give more time to listening to music of all sorts.) But then, 'the impact of twentieth-century painting on the movies ... is limited'. Hobsbawm admits to 'some expressionism in the Weimar cinema' (yes, indeed, and also some response to painting's use of machine imagery), and some influence on the US

Van Gogh, *Fourteen Sunflowers in a Vase*, 1888, oil on canvas, 93 × 73 cm



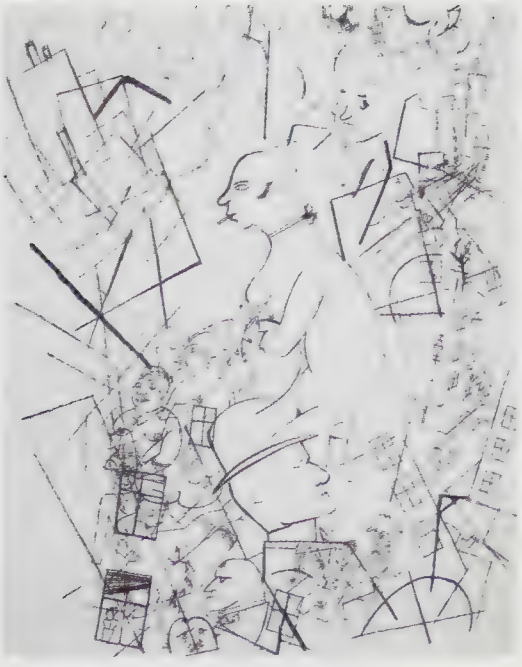
Georges Braque, *Man with Guitar*, 1911–12

cinema from Hopper's pictures. What about Eisenstein, the essential creator of the modern film, and his debt to painting? Hobsbawm nowhere refers to collage and the principle of the constructed image, painting's greatest invention since adopting oil paints. What about Surrealist painting and the cinema? And the role painters played in advancing photography, most obviously Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy? Hobsbawm says very little about the way Russian painters of the 1910s and '20s transferred their developed sense of materials and form from picture-making to product design in a period of economic crisis and socialist aspirations. Painters have been prominent in developing the mass arts which Hobsbawm measures painting against. He refuses to acknowledge this outgoing creativity, or perhaps he would say it proves the death of painting. I would argue that it proves painting's centrality.

Hobsbawm plays the numbers game when it suits him. He quotes a French survey which discovered that van Gogh is more popular than Braque, and repeats the point by illustrating the Dutchman's *Sunflowers* next to a Cubist Braque: one is accessible, says the caption, the other 'needs to be explained before it is understood'. I doubt that explanation alone can make either of them understood. Perhaps Cubist painting will remain a minority interest, yet it transformed our visual culture. Are minority interests to be forbidden? History is one, and so is jazz; Captain Beefheart and Jarvis Cocker are certainly more popular. He does not tell us that more people go to museums and galleries than to football matches. I don't set much store by the fact myself. More people queued for the Royal Academy's post-1900 Monets than for the pre-1900 Monets – my observation, but it doesn't prove anything either. Hobsbawm inevitably uses Walter Benjamin's words about 'the age of technical reproducibility', adding that art has failed 'to survive this competition', and quotes Ortega y Gasset's absurd comment that the Cubists merely preferred geometrical forms 'to the soft lines of living bodies'. We have an infinity of art, usually in the form of easel paintings, delivering the soft lines of living bodies, and additional supplies of such pleasing things from photography and film; do all artists have to go on adding to this stock? And wasn't Ortega trying to protect art from becoming modern and popular? As for Benjamin's point about art's loss of aura, what strikes me is how art has thrived thanks to artists' prints and multiples, and the mass-produced images people call 'prints'. These are everywhere, in the shops, in real homes and in the homes TV invents for us.

When Hobsbawm comments that George Grosz's move from Germany to the peaceful permissiveness of the USA caused him to lose 'his power as artist', he is repeating what every account of Grosz says. It always strikes me as a bit simplistic. Perhaps he would have gone that way without America; he had thought he was being very American when he was at his sharpest. By the 1930s he was tired of being admired and hunted down as a red and a satirist; he wanted to be taken seriously as an easel painter. Hobsbawm illustrates two Grosz drawings, a post-Cubist satirical one of 1918 and a 'soft lines' one of 1939: naked thighs splayed, pulled-down stockings, an open robe and a pulled-up skirt. Both are skilful. The second is taken to prove his decline, but shall we play the numbers game here? Which drawing would people go for?

If I am not as patient with Hobsbawm's essay as he was with mine, it is because it fails to evince any real interest in its subject. One more telling instance. He illustrates two Victor Pasmores, a painting of 1947, *The Park*, uncharacteristic but OK, and a painted relief construction of 1961, *Linear Motif*. The joint caption describes Pasmore as 'an artist who could change styles at will', the implication being that this typifies modern decadence. Are painters not allowed to 'change their style'? What is the import of 'at will'? Pasmore was a marvellously subtle painter of figures and townscapes before he decided that paintings should be abstract and preferably three-dimensional. That does not prove arbitrariness or even inconstancy. Many modern artists were much more mobile: Picasso blatantly so, but also the more resolute, more classical Matisse. Goya and Turner changed tack dramatically. Michelangelo and Titian moved a long, long way. The freedom to think and 'will' came in when artists stopped being craftsmen awaiting orders. It is not painters who change we should worry about but the many who settle on one brand-image for the sake of fame and fortune.



George Grosz, *Eva*, 1918, from *Ecce Homo*

George Grosz, *Study in Texture*, 1939

Hobsbawm ends on the last words of Paul Klee's public lecture, given in January 1924 when a right-wing local government was assaulting the Bauhaus – that December Gropius announced that the school would close – about how he and his colleagues were looking for 'the support of a people' but hadn't yet found it: 'we can't do more than that'. Hobsbawm adds: 'And it wasn't enough'. The art, design work and the teaching of the Bauhaus have become and still are world famous and influential. Klee, making easel paintings in an endless variety of styles and media, has become one of the most popular painters of modern times, judging by exhibitions, books and, above all, reproductions. What more does Hobsbawm want? Why that smug, *QED*-type comment?

After all this nagging I return to the larger issue. Attacking modern art has a long history. Behind it is a longer one of denunciations, back at least to Vasari's mockery of 'modern', i.e. Gothic, art and his disapproval of Venetian brush-led, expressive painting as against the firm disegno of Michelangelo and his followers, of whom he was one. English riters have always done their bit, from rubbishing Turner via denouncing Impressionism to the present. I have a copy of Lionel Lindsay's slim volume *Addled Art*, published in 1946. He also wrote fulsome volumes on Charles Keene and Alfred Munnings. 'The defence of art, my only religion, demands the truth', Lindsay writes at the start of a chapter on 'The Jew in Modern Painting', in which modern art is revealed to be a racket worked by Jewish artists and dealers, only in it for the money. The sight of a book on Picasso in the window of a Paris gallery maddens him, but then Picasso was of 'Spanish, Jewish and Italian stock'. Lindsay took his line from various French authors, and did not spare any English writer or artist he could accuse of promoting ugliness and insanity.

The present English vogue for assaulting modern art is something else. Is it a *fin de siècle* sickness? A hundred years ago critical languor and disdain were countered by the critical optimism and aspirations that eased modernism's birth. The media of today, hunting in packs after the latest individual or group that might be cult-worthy, but always looking for the next, breed disgust in those who know modern art through them. Hobsbawm very nearly blames artists for this. He certainly blames them for the fact that the world is not a better place. Did they not promise Utopia? In fact, it was rarely the artists themselves who asserted they were breaking with all traditions to develop new perspectives on the world. That was the doing of attached scribblers of the Marinetti sort, or even Apollinaire, who wrote good stuff and bad about art but earns our respect as a poet. Overweening words rarely need answering and should not elicit absurd rebuttals.

It is odd that a great historian like Hobsbawm should join in this game. He may be right to say, in *Age of Extremes*, that we live in 'an era of decomposition, uncertainty and crisis'. I suspect this goes with our expanding inner and outer awareness. But isn't he adding further negatives to it? People say that Christianity has not failed, because it has never been tried. Likewise socialism. Art has never claimed to be a programme of social reform. The works exist for us to engage with. The hubbub around them swells, the need to promote them to the masses hides their true value, and people who should have better things to do denounce the whole lot on principle without telling us what that principle is. Hobsbawm has been misled because he has attended only to secondary sources. Go to the primary material, young man, make yourself familiar with that and then come back and tell us about it.

It is doubly odd that this lecture should have been commissioned by a great art publisher, now celebrating 50 years in the business. Naturally they want a major voice like Hobsbawm's for the Walter Neurath Memorial series, but the result is shaming.

Lindsay and his like claimed that modern art is ugly and evil; their evidence was that they didn't like it. There is a kind of sad honesty in preferring bad art to good. As for the rest, Lindsay had to find someone to blame. The Germans blamed the bolsheviks. In *Modernismus*, published in 1934, Sir Reginald Blomfeld, architect and past President of the Royal Academy, blamed the Germans. In 1893 the German critic Max Nordau published the foundation document for all this in his best-selling *Degeneration*, blaming everything that wasn't nicely traditional on bad genes and thus giving the Nazis their cultural slogans. The English translation went through seven editions in its first year, 1895. Bernard Shaw, a.k.a. GBS, was one of the few who slammed it.

The question I end with is whether today anyone would be interested in the opposite. Hobsbawm condemns modern painting because it is static and not produced collectively. (Does he write his books collectively?) I admire painting for being physically static but marvellously rich and incremental in one's experience, and for usually being the work of individuals who pour into it their love of seeing and of making, and will try to do it even better tomorrow. I am not alone. Perhaps saying so will be counted controversial one day. At present, it seems, no one would want to listen, or be allowed to.

Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Gardes*, Thames and Hudson, £7.95.

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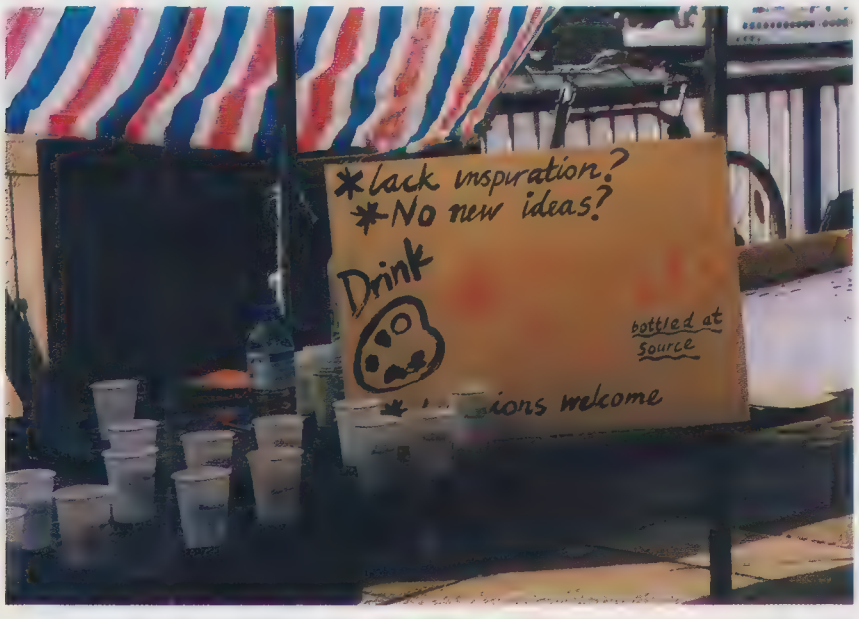


The Articultural Show, outside The Royal Festival Hall, 7 August 1999

The Articultural Show. P... D... ...
...hocolate man at Jibby's Art B... 7 August 1999

Artists' piss

Who are we exactly, if we are British? As a society we have undergone many transformations, especially recently. The other day I felt these transformations in the air as I was strolling along the stalls at Articultural, a one-day art event on London's South Bank, open to the public. The theme was the traditional English country fête. It's a curious idea for an art event to question the rules of fêtes but that was the idea here. The currency used was sheep – one sheep note cost £1.10. You bought the notes at a sheep bank and then everything at the fête cost so many sheep. The stalls all had art-related concepts. They were all quite funny. At one you could join the Brians Sewell Academy (staged by two artists, hence the plural) devoted to the art critic, famous both for his weekly tirades against art with no skill and for his plummy talking style. There was a play of interrelated themes: elaborate certificates of merit, specially composed flowery mottos, a life-size reproduction of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* to demonstrate traditional notions of skill, and – fitting with the country theme – a bowl of plums.

One stall had a sheep game – 'Sheep Dip'. A tiny plastic model sheep was balanced on a balloon. The player had to take a feather duster and knock a cardboard see-saw arrangement so it hit the balloon and sent the sheep flying (if the hit was accurate) into the mouth of a paper funnel a few feet long, like an aeroplane fire escape. There was a revolving saucer on the ground at the other end of the tunnel with a few little containers in it – one with sheep shit, one with grass, one with water. The aim was to land the sheep in the water and dip it. As well as a game it was an artwork on the stall of the dealer Jibby Beane. It was by a recent art college graduate and it was for sale for a hundred sheep.

Another stall at Articultural had an artist clairvoyant giving readings – 'You are facing many decisions' she would intone amusingly to her clients, for a few sheep. Somewhere else you could be photographed in popular bad movie or TV soap opera set-ups, dressed in appropriate gear – if it was *Towering Inferno*, for example, the costume was a white coat with burned hems. And somewhere else you could buy a polystyrene cup of something called 'Artist's Piss (for 'inspiration') – 'bottled at source A sculpture of a male figure made of chocolate could be licked for a sheep. An artist running a rifle range had 'The Right To Bare Arms' written on her bare arm and an artist barber offering hair-cuts wore an apron covered with blood.

I liked all these sights and thought they were about things in the world that everyone knows about. But then I thought that wasn't true and it was about a very particular set of codes, not a universal pleasure event.

The shock of the ingénue

At first there were many bad reviews for *This Is Modern Art* – it was a sad decline in arts programmes when you thought of *Civilization* and *The Shock of the New*, it was said – and only a few good ones. These ones said it was a refreshing raising of the level of arts programmes. But then in the end the series was gradually accepted as a cultural landmark and those who initially rejected it had to change their minds in a kind of tortuous painful public convulsion, like penitents in an Inquisition scene by Goya. And wherever I went I was mobbed by friendly converts.

And then in July I was shocked to see my name in the book section of the *Independent on Sunday*, in the bestsellers' list. It was at Number Seven, under 'General Hardback ... for *This Is Modern Art* ... book based on the series.

... ingenuous introduction to Tracey, Damien, Gary et al', the one-liner description read. I know these Sunday papers writers love saying 'Tracey' and 'Gary' because they feel it cuts things down to size. Especially 'Trace' – that's their favourite.

And interestingly, she's at the bottom of the list to win the Turner Prize according to the bookies, William Hill. Surely she ought to be tipped as the definite winner? In fact the psychology of the Turner Prize points in this direction. Because when they nominate artists each nomination is a statement: 'We confirm this or that artistic rhetoric is accepted'. And the rhetoric of Tracey's art is that there is such a thing as transcendent greatness, whereas the rhetoric of the other nominated artists is that there might not be and it's all relative.

Abracadabra

I saw this show in the papers. It had a horse hanging from the ceiling. The horse looked – I don't know – like nothing. Or like anything else – like a thing in any show of new art. I couldn't feel anything at all about it. I saw the reviews of the show. They said it was very good or very bad. It didn't seem to matter either way.

Some of the articles in the papers mentioned there was a new Curator of Interpretation at the Tate, where the show was on. Maybe he'd just been appointed or maybe he'd been in the Office of Interpretation for a while. In any case, it seemed annoying. For God's sake! Either art is shocking and meaningless or it's not! What do we want interpretations for?

For myself, I prefer no interpretation. I feel it's like the Rolling Stones. When they sing *Bitch on Sticky Fingers* for example – or *Brown Sugar* – these are straightforwardly offensive songs. Leave them alone, don't interpret them. And that's the same for new popular art. It's either striking a chord or it isn't.

But then I was driving by the Tate and I thought I'd go in anyway and see. And I found the show to be wholly commendable. It was in a big rectangular space like a community hall, maybe. Very bright and white and clear. Many people were in there, looking at random artstuff. They were really engaged. Nothing was special. Everything was democratic. Few of the names of the artists were starry. I didn't get the feeling the milling public cared much what the interpretations might be that the Tate's new curator might have to offer. They were content to interpret for themselves. It was a popular art show, with no experts, not like when there's a Rembrandt show.

I imagined Paul Noble's drawings in 'Abracadabra' of doleys and puking spliff-heads being disputed over by experts in the future. Was this one by Noble or an assistant? Was it School of Noble? What did X-rays reveal? Pentimenti showing a whole different drift? How did this one compare to the Noble in Stuttgart? A more expressionist Noble? Was Noble sad when he drew it?

Installation of *Abracadabra*. Tate Gallery, London. Photo: Rod Tidnam and David Lamber

One video work by a French artist in the show was about people in prehistory possibly having two thumbs on each hand. There was a lecture in French about the idea, and some casts of hands with two thumbs could be seen near the video. It wasn't the idea of the thumbs that was good. In fact nothing about it was good exactly. It was well presented. It took an idea and presented it with confidence and flair and with clarity. And the Tate curators mixed it in with the other works in 'Abracadabra' in a good way. Not good exactly. Well, maybe good is the word.

I went out to the front of the gallery and looked up at the horse. Yep, nothing had changed. It was a horse with its legs too long. It was by Maurizio Cattelan, a Spanish artist. Maybe it expressed a Spanish national feeling of being a bit out of focus culturally — like the feeling I alluded to earlier of our own British shaky sense of cultural identity.

And of course they too used to have an Empire and now they have international exchangeable culture, like ours and like everyone's in the world. They must think: *Don Quixote*! The height of culture! *Caramba!* What happened? But it's just tilting at windmills to try and turn the art clock back.

Staggered by trembly

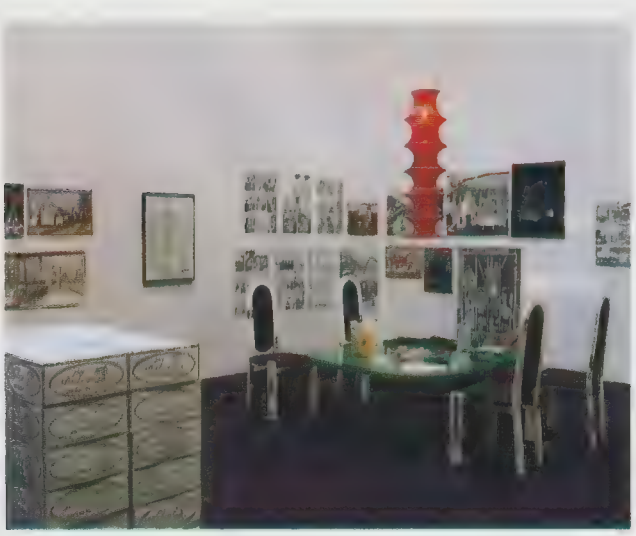
After thinking about that, I went to the show of Cy Twombly and Donald Judd, in a different part of the Tate. I was staggered by the Twomblys, especially since he can be so boring. But this Twombly exhibition was well selected with hardly anything boring in it, and some of it was even from the '80s, the height of his period of decline, if a decline can have a height.

Except the Curator of Interpretation's contributions. Surely we can see a phallic symbol for ourselves? Also, I would prefer to have my own ideas about whether something is rough and ready or a bit like graffiti or not. And not be told that it is knowingly or artily rough and ready by a vicar–y wall label. But I couldn't complain because on the whole I was having raptures in front of the trembly lines.

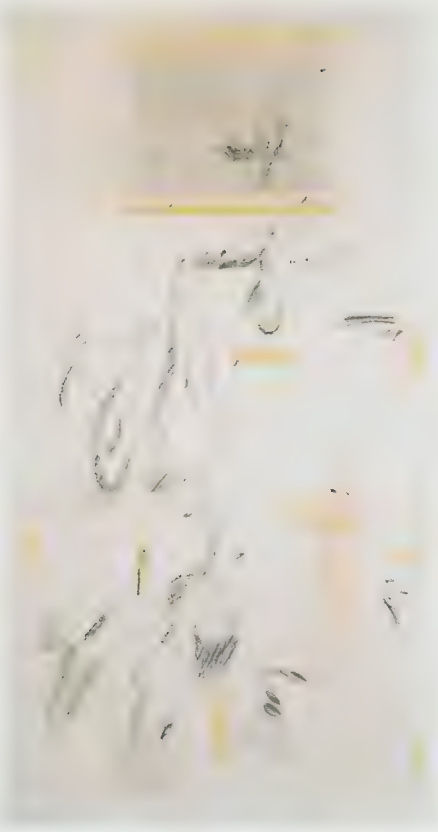
Then I went into the space with the Judds. These were all good, too. But they were not very well presented because there were too many of them. On the other hand, the Curator of Interpretation's wall labels in here were good. They pointed out things you wouldn't necessarily have thought about even having seen them with your own eyes. For example, the exact number of units in a stacked shelf formation and the way the intervals were all regular and their measurements corresponded with the measurements of parts of the work which were not empty space but solid materials.

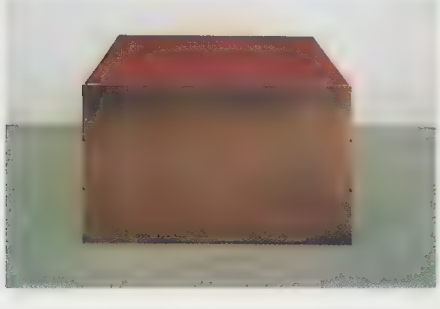
Important historical context

Judd is from the '60s and that was a period when calling a spade a spade in art and not having a lot of metaphors that could mean any number of things, like in great literature, was considered good because it was against hypocrisy and bad values. Good values were free love, ban the bomb and good rock and roll. And groupies. But then there was a rising tide of sleaze, plus murdering acid-crazed hippies who'd gone out of their minds listening to The Beatles' Helter Skelter. No wonder we had the '80s and the return to family values! Not Charles Manson's family, of course, which was a murdering bunch of sex-mad hippie women with shaved heads and swastikas tattooed on their foreheads – quite influentia stylistically on Punk in the '70s – but the family unit, which was a mummy and daddy with two or three kids. *The*



Paul Noble.
The Doley Game, 1995–96.
mixed media: board game, sound, drawings. Courtesy Maureen Paley/Interim Art. © The artist





top: Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1969, pencil and collage on paper. 88 × 45.7 cm. The Froehlich Foundation

middle: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1968, Plexiglass and steel ten parts, each: 23 101.5 × 79 cm. The Froehlich Foundation

bottom: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1972, copper, enamel and aluminium 916 × 155.5 × 178.2 cm. Tate Gallery, London

Spectator coming reassuringly through the letter box every Friday, and nobody sexually perverted or psycho in any way.

A twinge of pain in the eye

There were strips of gaffer tape on the floor round each of the Judds – to scare off visitors who might want to swing on Judd's shelves or lean into the empty boxes and write their initials inside or draw phallic symbols inspired by Twombly – and these tapings were frankly unsightly to the eye. But apart from these two visual unpleasantnesses – overcrowding and bad taping – I found little to complain about. Judd is an artist from history. We should think about him and his ideas because history is important.

More insights into what we have become

The '60s was a time of idealism. All art from then must be seen in this way. The '70s was a bit more obscure. It was a time of some other kind of cliché. The '80s was about money and a complete loss of all cultural values in favour of fake values. Everything was run in the '80s by spivs who worked in Broadgate, where there is a big sculpture by Richard Serra.

In the '90s we don't know what the general meanings of our own decade are. What is certain is that there are lots of programmes on TV about the '60s, really shoddily made, with bits of old film footage just cut together in a hurry and a narration that says things like 'Radio Caroline' or 'Carnaby Street', just hoping for the best.

Brian again

Writing in the *Standard* about 'Abracadabra', with its stuffed horse and its squirrels committing suicide, Brian Sewell said something like: 'The Tate's Curator of Interpretation would be a happy man if the artists pressed their warm turds into his palms'. It's the kind of thing that makes the nation love him.

Normally I don't mention sex in my writing, but I notice Brian went on a wild sex spree in the *Standard* recently. It must have been the feel of the nation's love plus the hot weather combining to bring out a reckless frisky streak and make him even more shockingly candid than usual. Soon after that outburst about the Curator of Interpretations, he described in staggering detail how he lost his virginity in Paris when young to a middle-aged American woman tourist whose glasses got ensnared in Brian's pubic hair. This was bad enough but then he went on

Gustave Courbet, *The Origin of the World*, 1866, oil on canvas

about how terrifyingly dark and bushy her own pubic hair was, drawing graphic parallels with Courbet's explicit painting *The Origin of the World*. It was an article about Paris and how all the values have gone down and you can't get a good *croque monsieur* any more.

Born again

By coincidence, I was in Paris myself in August, to see the Robert Delaunay show. To like him nowadays is difficult because of his optimistic pure modernist spirit and delight in then new forms like aeroplanes and the Eiffel Tower. But in a way it's like Christianity. It's a belief system. And you can go to an exhibition like this one, be full of resistance at first, but then have an overwhelming feeling of wonderment and acceptance, like being born again, even if it's only for an hour, which is usually about how long it lasts.

The Centre Pompidou was surrounded by hoardings because it was closed for renovation. The Delaunay show was in a bit kept specially open. Big signs on the hoarding said DELAUNAY, with an arrow next to it, so you knew what direction to walk in, which was a relief in this heat, to know you were on the totally most direct route. On the way, there were notices on the hoardings from Swatch, the sponsor of the exhibition. 'Art is what you make of it – Swatch'. How true, I thought. 'How long is an art minute?' – also by Swatch. That was a profound one!

I went round the show and looked at the paintings quickly and I noticed how with this artist the pictures ask so often to be read in two ways: broken and put-together. And how there is always a close relationship with the purely academic.

I had a look at *Les Trois Grâces*. This very big painting always seemed to me like an academic idea of nudes done in an academic version of cubism. I saw it as a cliché of modernity and it never failed to remind me of a lot of books about modernism, the way the writer will pull everything together at the end of some chapter or other by saying, wisely: 'Yes, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the atonal symphony, also lots of films from Germany and, er, *The Wasteland*, express a fragmented view of life, like in a cubist painting.' You could feel this painting was painted just for these writers.

Robert Delaunay, *Les Trois Grâces*, 1912, oil on canvas, 130.2 × 195.6 cm

I sat on the floor against the wall opposite. After all it was the afternoon or après-midi, and there was a relaxed atmosphere in here, air-conditioned. A guard offered me her stool. (I thought of Brian! Hey, not really!) But I felt fine where I was. I looked over at the broken-up figures and I started to like the way the painting had been made to be re-made in the eye of whoever was looking at it, in quite a literal way. After all, I now saw, so much about it was un-literal.

I started to be amazed by the colour – every patch of colour looked good against every other patch. A lot of it was pastoral, blue and green, but synthetic not descriptive. There were several scenes all breaking up into each other. On one side the Seine, a bridge, houses, a curtain. On the other side, the Eiffel Tower and some buildings. In the middle, the three pink cubist awkward toppling chequer–pattern nudes. I was overwhelmed!

Then I looked at *L'Equipe de Cardiff*, the monumental rugby game painting so depressing in art books, and in reality, usually, too, when you're trawling round the Pompidou's permanent collection. But today I marvelled at the painterly surface, the rhythmic harmonising of colour patches, the ever–changing and renewing possibilities of different configurations, depending on what point of the picture you started at, standing close to. Or else you could see the whole thing from a distance of a few yards and then the eye would be rhythmically bounced around anyway. Onto the ASTRA sign, the purple figure, the red figure, the pink letters spelling DELAUNAY on a green ground, the red fairground wheel, the white aeroplane, or something else. Nothing was really these things, everything was pure colour and light. It was a world view – the new is good, the popular has a place – and that was good too. It probably really was like that. Why not?

I went up to one of his Windows paintings, *Les Trois Fenêtres, la Tour et la Roue* (1912), a medium-sized horizontal one, showing a scene of a street, a fair-ground wheel and the Eiffel Tower, from a curtained window. There were rough triangles, each one part of a sun-burst of triangles, with every burst describing a spectrum – for example, one set of patches went yellow-red-light blue-white-purple-green-black-ochre and back to the original yellow – and every spectrum interlocked with other spectrums. Every meeting of patch-edges was exciting and a drama, like in Jasper Johns but not expressing doubt. Not that doubt is bad. It's good in Cézanne for example. In fact it's good in Johns, too. But here whatever it was, even if it was or wasn't doubt (intelligent enquiry, experiment, research, joy in the fact that there hadn't been anything to doubt yet), it was good anyway.

The simple world

On BBC2's *Newsnight* there was a discussion in response to an article written for *The Guardian* by the director of the Barbican Centre and former TV news announcer, John Tusa. The article said art writers were afraid to judge anything nowadays and instead hid behind a mask of irony or only praised art that was politically correct. Consequently there was only relativism where certainty should be. At least there should be an attempt at certainty even if the critical judgement turned out to be wrong later. After several re-readings I felt this article was basically a call for a more simple world, or a simple dualistic system of good and bad, so an unnecessary confusion could be cleared up.

Robert Delaunay, *L'Equipe de Cardiff*, 1913, oil on canvas, 195.5 × 132 cm

One of his main fears was irony. But irony is not only escapism or avoidance. When it arrived in art it was good, because it was better than certainties that had become hollow. You could use it to find out what the new certainties might be. You can't expect them to just come up straight away! And irony allows you to examine something from a distance, to believe part of it but not the whole. Plus it's not the enemy of art. It's in books all the time.

But there wasn't any point trying to imagine the course of an argument no one was really thinking about. A woman on the discussion, who was a judge of the Turner Prize, said she thought John Tusa might be wrong to claim art critics were afraid to say anything was bad, for example Brian Sewell was always saying that. But Brian, who was there on the panel, said he felt the article was right and he believed John was influenced by Brian's own columns. Then John said he didn't mean critics or reviewers actually, but journalists and writers generally. And that was confusing – if he didn't mean people whose job it was to be judgemental, how could he complain about those whose job was just to list things or describe them? Then he couldn't think of any art he could mention that was bad, but he thought he remembered something he'd read in the paper which might have been bad.

From his description I recognised an article by Peter Conrad in *The Observer* criticising *This Is Modern Art* for reducing the values of art to mere life-style. But John appeared not to have understood the thrust of this article – which was written in a heavy–handed attempt at an ironic style – and believed it supported the series and was in favour of mere life-style. Everyone else in the discussion seemed not to have read the article and to know even less than John what he was talking about at this stage. Then Brian asked the woman from the Turner Prize why she was a judge if she wasn't an art critic, and she said she was one of the Patrons of New Art. Oh, OK then, he said.

Unlike Articultural, which I was reminded of now because of the outrageous sound of Brian's voice on TV, the whole event had an unworked out, inaccurate, dead on the ground, desultory feel to it. And on another level it was making me depressed because only that afternoon I'd agreed to be on a Channel Four News discussion the next day about the same subject, for a fee of £75, or about 67 sheep.

'Abracadabra: International Contemporary Art', until 26 September, Tate Gallery, London. Supported by The Henry Moore Foundation and the Association Française d'Action Artistique, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, in association with *The Times*. Catalogue £17.95

Robert Delaunay: De l'impressionnisme à l'abstraction 1906–1914, catalogue to the exhibition at the [illegible] Centre, Paris, £40.

Julian Mitchell

But Tell Us More!

Dr Gachet was so eccentric that van Gogh thought he might be even madder than he was himself. But what about his son Paul?

Paul Gachet Fils, *c.*1905, photograph

Paul Gachet liked to do a job himself, or it wasn't done properly. For instance, he was in the middle of mending the staircase of his home at Auvers-sur-Oise when he was called up for World War I. For the next five years his wife and sister had to make do with a ladder. It makes you wonder – did he have no leave in all that time? Or was he too traumatised by his experiences on the western front to pick up a hammer? In either case, most women would have called in the village carpenter, but these two didn't. Why not? Were they afraid of Paul? Or afraid of what the carpenter might find? Very few people were allowed inside the Gachet house, and even fewer upstairs, where, in a darkened room with no smoking permitted, van Gogh's *The Church at Auvers* hung completely unknown for 50 years. There were other wonders. The collection, amassed by Dr Gachet, Paul's father, included 44 paintings and drawings by van Gogh, 42 Cézannes, 34 Guillaumins, 13 Pissarros, the odd Monet, Renoir and Sisley, plus over a thousand miscellaneous artworks. There were also numerous unconvincing works by the Gachets themselves, and slightly better ones by their protégée Blanche Derousse.

Paul was trained as an agricultural engineer, and early in life wanted to go on an expedition to the Congo, but his father, who was perhaps not merely odd but overbearing, forbade it. Thereafter, apart from his war service, Paul did nothing whatever except 'research' a book about van Gogh which his father had cogitated but never written. The doctor, whose thesis had been on melancholia, practised medicine of many sorts, in Paris and Auvers, on patients both physically and mentally ill. But he was more interested in art, and knew many artists, both as doctor and friend. He had some inherited income, and word soon got around among struggling avant-garde painters that he would take a picture instead of a fee. Cézanne came and lived in Auvers for a couple of years, partly to be near him; Gachet may have tried to help him in his difficult relations with his father. When Renoir needed a doctor for a dying young woman, Gachet was rewarded for his unsuccessful intervention with a delightful oil sketch of a living one. He wasn't always so lucky: his collection has some truly terrible paintings by utterly forgotten painters. But the star turns (though no one could have known it at the time he acquired them) were the major late van Goghs painted during the last two months of Vincent's life when he was living in Auvers under the doctor's again ineffectual care. Gachet did a drawing of him on his death-bed, and broke down at his funeral while giving an address.

Vincent van Gogh, *The Church at Auvers*, 1890, oil on canvas, 94 × 74 cm

Paul's book was ostensibly to be a filial homage to the doctor-father who loved art and artists. But it's quite obvious, even from the limited information in the catalogue of the 'Le Docteur Gachet' exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris, that it was simply an excuse for a quiet and comfortable life. The more research he did, the more he claimed he had to do. The purpose was to fill his life, not to achieve publication. He was one of those fundamentally lazy people, familiar from academia, the function of whose 'work' is not to expand human knowledge but to prevent them from having to do anything important or interesting with their lives. He inherited in 1909 when he was twenty-six. Sixty-two years later, on his death-bed, he was lamenting that if he could only have another year or two he might get the book done. In all that time there had been no artist too bad, no connection too tenuous, for him to investigate. To be fair, he did publish a spin-off about his father's relationships with the painters he collected, but the catalogue calls its prose pedantic and often incorrect or confused; his pernicketiness spared the reader no detail, however inept. Beyond comfort, which was obtained by the regular but discreet sale of paintings over the years, and the appearance of a respectable scholarly life, he had only one ambition. Neither he nor his sister having children, he wanted the family name to be continued through its association with the paintings his father had acquired. So when he persuaded his sister Marguerite that they should sell van Gogh's portrait of her at the piano, which no one outside the family had ever seen, and which had hung at the foot of her bed for 40 years, it was all right to part with such a personal heirloom because it ended up in a museum with the family name attached. That it passed through Wildenstein's on the way, for a sum of money the catalogue is too po-faced or perhaps too frightened to disclose, was neither here nor there; his little family was still comfortably off, and due homage had been paid to the doctor. What his sister thought, like so much else one wants to know, is not considered worth mentioning. Later Paul and Marguerite gave many of their choicest unsold works to the French nation, and they can usually be seen in the Musée d'Orsay. Paul got the Légion d'Honneur in return. This must have given him great satisfaction, particularly if his whole life was, as one begins to think, not a homage to his father at all, but a not necessarily subconscious rebellion against him. Dr Gachet had been put up for it several times and been turned down. Marguerite's reward, it seems, was an empty wall.

There is a description of Paul at the very end of his life, when both wife and sister were dead, by the then young British art historian Michael Pakenham. He was welcome at Auvers because he was researching someone obscure enough even for Paul's taste, and didn't ask to see the Cézannes or van Goghs. They got on so well, discussing the most picayune details of the Paris art scene of the 1880s, that Pakenham was even asked for Christmas dinner, though he had to eat it alone. Paul had his in bed, where he spent the winters. Pakenham's four pages are the only ones in a catalogue of 300 in which Paul Gachet comes to life. The exhibition organisers are interested in him solely as the curator and seller of his father's collection. They don't even tell us such important and easily discoverable things as what his war service actually was, or when his wife died. Of the many virtues of Hilary Spurling's *Matisse*, not the least is the way it has shown up the fundamental narrowness and laziness behind much of what currently passes for art history. Surely the idea that a work of art or literature exists quite independently of the life of the artist can't still be fashionable, even in Paris? It's as old and stupid as the idea that only a biographical approach can tell you what a work means. To have an exhibition about the Gachet collection without telling us enough about the Gachets is all too typical of contemporary curatorial attitudes.

But then, at the Grand Palais, it's not the meaning of

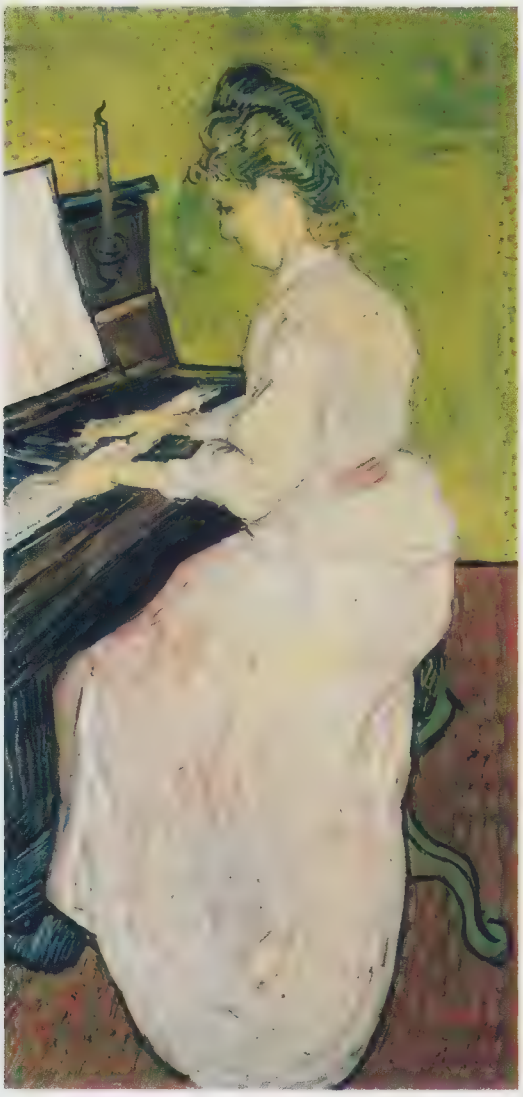
Vincent van Gogh, *Portrait of Doctor Paul Gachet*, 1890, oil on canvas, 66 × 57 cm

the works that is under debate, but their authenticity. Dr Gachet's house, while he was alive, was full of artists, but his son had a notice on his gate saying 'No callers', and he meant it. He was extremely secretive about the contents of the collection, would rarely lend a picture to an exhibition, and almost never allowed even serious researchers in to look, let alone to take notes, and certainly not photographs. Wildenstein's are thanked by the organisers of the exhibition, but their involvement with Paul does make one wonder how much his secretiveness was due to the nature of his business with dealers. Many Frenchmen try to avoid paying tax – did he, too? Anyway, the long years of concealment had a dismaying outcome. As soon as the pictures began to appear, so did rumours that the collection was full of fakes. These were mostly started, we gather, by a retired naval officer, though the catalogue fails to tell us anything about him, why he felt so strongly on the subject, or why anyone took him seriously. The exhibition is not interested in him, any more than it is in Paul Gachet. Its sole purpose is to show that the pictures he gave to the state are genuine. With all the apparatus of modern science, it does precisely that.

Van Gogh often copied his own works, and there are two portraits of Dr Gachet. That in the Gachet donation has been questioned. In both, a 'grief-hardened' man of sixty or so, with gingery hair under a white cap, is leaning on his right elbow. In the d'Orsay version the table-cloth is red; in the other, red and green, and in that there are yellow novels and fox-gloves in a vase (the digitalis used to treat depression); the d'Orsay just has fox-gloves on the table. In both the background is various shades of blue, meant, van Gogh told his sister, to be hills and, presumably, sky. (The hills blue and remembered from those behind the asylum at St Rémy, perhaps.) These portraits, with 'the heart-broken expression of our time', have close connections with a wonderful self-portrait and an *Arlésienne* (also leaning glumly and symbolically on one elbow), which van Gogh had had sent on to him to Auvers from the South. They were examples of what he called the modern portrait seek it in colour', he wrote. 'I should like to paint portraits which would appear after a century to the people living then as apparitions.' He was not attempting this through photographic realism, but through 'passionate expressi

– that is to say, using our knowledge of and our modern taste for colour as a means of arriving at the expression and intensification of character'. The century has passed, and the characters still seem as intense and expressive as the day they were painted. But they're not. The most interesting technical discovery made for the Gachet exhibition is that the pictures are indeed becoming apparitions; the purple and pink used by van Gogh have faded almost away. The flowers of the fox-gloves, once correctly purple, are now blue. We know they were purple because Dr Gachet had his portrait copied in water-colour not long after it was painted, and the copy, a water-colour which has not faded, shows the original colour. There are, too, traces of it under the frame of the d'Orsay portrait, which seems to prove conclusively that it is genuine.

Other pictures have been doubted simply because some people cannot believe that a great artist can ever paint a bad picture. As a collector, Doctor Gachet was something of a picker-up of rightly unconsidered trifles. Some of the Cézannes may, for instance, have been abandoned as failures when the painter left Auvers. Some of the van Goghs may have been filched from the pub where he died – though the van Gogh family never complained. (Theo van Gogh may have been grateful to have them off his hands. He had, it's true, just sold one of Vincent's pictures; but it was the only one he ever did sell; he had a young baby, and his small flat was crowded out with his brother's rolled up canvases.) Among the van Goghs there is a very odd picture of two little girls, and a peculiar one of cows after an engraving by Doctor Gachet after Jordaens. Both have been much queried. It is now shown that, in the former, van Gogh also used the now faded pinks and purples. And the latter bears all the



Vincent van Gogh, *Mademoiselle Gachet at the Piano*, 1890, oil on canvas, 102.5 × 50 cm

Vincent van Gogh, *Two Children*, 1890, oil on canvas, 51.2 × 52 cm

marks of one of his quick original sketches; if it is by a pasticheur, it's by one with the same swift skills as van Gogh himself, which seems highly improbable. Doubters point to the absence of evidence in Vincent's letters to Theo, but they were seeing each other quite a lot that summer and Vincent was painting non-stop and writing less often. What for me is the clinching argument against fakery is the hopelessness of the Gachets' own art, as well as the fact that badness in a picture never stopped Doctor Gachet adding it to his collection. He was so eccentric that van Gogh thought him possibly even madder than he was himself. But he had his own printing press and encouraged van Gogh to make his only known etching, of the glum doctor smoking. Dr Gachet and van Gogh pulled an unknown number of copies of this print, and Paul Gachet even more. It was another thing that gave rise to suspicion.

Once the gossip started it seemed nothing could stop it, and Paul's last years were darkened by the rumours. But the exhibition is not designed to clear his or his father's name, but to let the curators of the Musée d'Orsay sleep easily in their beds. Where the Legion of Honour has been given, the honour of France is at stake! The chief function of art history in modern times is to make collectors, curators and ministers of culture feel comfortable about the health of their possessions. If you've got what you think is £40 million on your wall, and it turns out you might get about £4000 for it as a fake, if you're lucky, there are questions in the Chamber of Deputies. If art wasn't so absurdly expensive – excuse me, was that the GNP of Costa Rica you just gave for your Jeff Koons? – there'd be less time and money spent preserving mundane scraps and scribbles in solander boxes for all eternity, just in case one of them might one day provide evidence for the authenticity of something else. With all the money about, and all the con men dealing and auctioneering and passing themselves off as connoisseurs, and all the journalists panting for a scandal, it's a very jumpy business being responsible for pictures. Not for nothing does the new Getty rigidly withhold its fabled wealth from living artists, spending it instead on administration, conservation, research, research and research into research. Art is a serious business. But the Gachet collection's all right, so the Minister of Culture can wipe his brow. Ribbons all round! But would someone please now give us some real information about Paul Gachet.

'Cézanne to Van Gogh: The Collection of Doctor Gachet', 24 September – 5 December, Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Catalogue £45.

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Richard Wollheim

History or Mystery?

Museums and their future: some assisted reflections

In the last two years or less, I have found myself – largely through invitations to do so – thinking about various problems that confront museums of modern art. I have addressed audiences at the Museum of Modern Art, at the Tate, and elsewhere.[1]

These are not, as one might at first think, narrow problems: in part because some of them also trouble traditional museums, in part because of the sobering thought that the new museums of the future will almost certainly be museums, not even just of modern but of contemporary art. Older art in the right quantity of the right quality is no longer available.

If the fundamental mission of any museum is to see that we, the public, understand the art that it owns, this, for a museum of modern art, means two things. First, like any other kind of museum, it has to present its individual works in the most comprehensible way, which, given the prevailing view that art can only be understood historically, calls for some kind of historical presentation. Secondly, and this is unique to the modern museum, it has to convince us that the most difficult, which generally equates with the most avant-garde, work it owns has as good a claim upon our attention as the most canonical works. If it isn't prepared to do this, it shouldn't own the works. And this too is, by general agreement, an historical task. It calls for a narrative that runs back from the work that needs justification to that which we are all ready to accept.

Twenty years ago, the consensus developed that both tasks could be solved in one, and the solution was the so-called labyrinth. This was a very strict hang, in which the position of each work in the total layout of the gallery was uniquely determined by its historical position, and the visitor was then relentlessly hounded down the years. The labyrinth was first instituted in the Tate Gallery in 1979, and then in 1984 the Museum of Modern Art in New York followed suit. The present director of the Tate Gallery, Nicolas Serota, who is no great friend to such single-mindedness, has described the result:

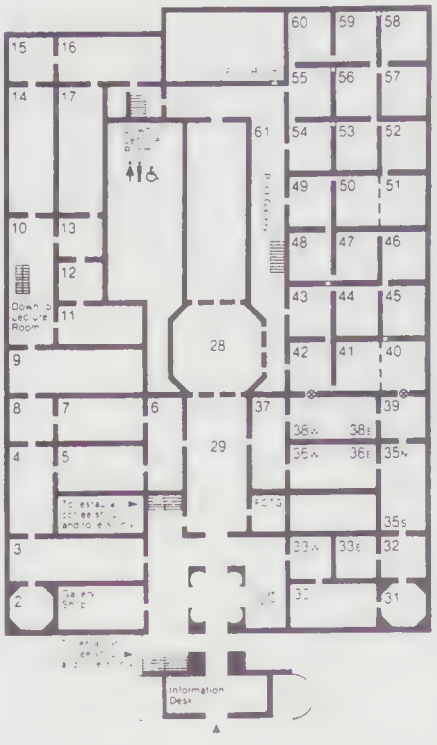
> The historical survey was densely hung in a sequence of square rooms, each of which represented the main movements of modern art... The visitor travels along a single path with no byways and only occasional opportunities for exit... Even areas of strength are presented primarily as further links in the chain of history.[2]

When the labyrinth was dominant, the visitor to either the Tate or MOMA who had internalised its layout already knew more about what came after what in modern art than he could have acquired from many hours poring over surveys and monographs.

But it goes without saying that knowing what comes after what is the raw material of historical understanding: it is not historical understanding itself. The big question was, and is, if a visitor wants to go those extra miles, can the museum layout be relied upon to carry him there?

I think that the answer is, No, and there are, I believe, two distinct ways in which the very didacticism of the labyrinthine hang can turn against itself.

In the first place, historical understanding can easily get replaced by something much narrower, which is better thought of as contextual understanding. Contextualism breaks in when the spectator is encouraged to think that every painting on which he lays eyes is best understood through looking hard enough at what hangs to its immediate left. For contextualism just is the view that any work of art is exclusively the effect of its immediate milieu: concurrent art, concurrent theory, concurrent criticism. The artist is represented by contextualism as literally the child of his time: the infant who absorbs passively the influence of the environment. And that cannot be right.



Plan of the Gallery, 1980s. Tate Gallery Archive

Secondly, the true nature of influence, the influence of one artist on another, specifically the difference, just touched upon, between passive and active influence, can get obscured. An artist is likely to be passively influenced by the art amongst which he grew up. But, when he tries to find, either in the immediate environment or secreted in the past, something that will match his needs, desires and ambitions, influence is something he initiates. Frank Auerbach once said to me that he could define what it was for him to be influenced by the work of another artist. It was when, on starting a painting, he went to his bookshelf, took down a book on that artist, and laid it open on the studio floor.

In talking both at MOMA and at the Tate, I illustrated the distinction between the two kinds of influence by considering the way the tradition of Spanish single-figure painting impinged very differently upon the work of two very different artists.

This tradition – which derived from the moment when painted canvases came to replace the great gilded retables of the late middle ages, the depicted saint substituting itself for the carved statue, the background for the darkened niche – was, through its very origins, unquestioningly committed to the dominance of the figure over the ground.

Picasso, who was brought up in this tradition, reverted to it whenever his work was strong: witness, after a period of debilitation, the portrait of Gertrude Stein, and then the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. However he also struggled hard, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so, against the excesses of the tradition. Much of his work can be seen as a struggle to

tame the unruliness of the figure and to listen to the claims of the ground. I am sure it was some part of the appeal of Cubism to Picasso that, with its fragmentation of the figure over the total pictorial surface, it allowed him *a* resolution, a temporary resolution, of this conflict.

But, if Picasso passively experienced this tradition, Manet deliberately sought it out, and placed himself under it. And, as if to illustrate how, when influence is active, it transmutes what it finds into what it wants, Manet's employment of the Spanish tradition is psychologically, expressively, worlds away from Picasso's. While apprehending the monumental force that Velazquez, in a painting like *Pablo de Valladolid*, arrived at by combining the single figure with the horizonless ground, Manet, pursuing a different effect, converted the ample figures of the old Spanish masters into dreamlike characters, suspended momentarily in a state of reverie.

Having, when I lectured, stressed the dangers implicit in the super-historical hang, I have, on returning to these issues, got interested in what the museum of today can, or should, do about these dangers. Should it, in the way it presents its collection, try to counter contextualism, or to remind its public that there is such a thing as active influence?

Recently I asked two major figures in the world of the museum, Timothy Potts, the new Director of the Kimbell Art Museum, and John Elderfield, Chief Curator at Large at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for their views.

I began by asking Potts what he thought a museum could do to correct the prevailing picture of influence, and specifically how active influence could be illustrated, and one of the first things I observed was that the distinction that I had found it important to make between two tasks that confront the museum – that of making individual works in the museum intelligible, and that of producing a narrative so that the presence of every work in the museum is justified – was not all that significant for someone whose business it is to exhibit a collection on the walls of a single building.

Potts was sceptical about the project I put to him.

Timothy Potts *First, there aren't that many collections that have the resources, the actual works, to be able to illustrate these leaps or these connections across the centuries. It's not always feasible to do. Secondly, I think that showing links of influence is something that it is particularly interesting and appropriate for temporary, or curated, exhibits which are making some particular point. Some of the most interesting exhibitions that are done, I think, are the ones that jump across cultures, across the chronological divide. But I think this kind of display, which is one that makes a very particular point, should not be one that a major museum, like the National Gallery or the Metropolitan, takes as a model for showing its permanent collection. The more traditional one of the historical march of styles and schools and artists has an obvious logic to it. Furthermore, and this is my third point, the historical hang has the pragmatic advantage that it finds a place for everything, whereas, with a hang of a wide-ranging kind, there will be a number of works for which there is no obvious partner. What do you do with them? You fall back on some more arbitrary arrangement, and what does that do to your logic?*

But, as I see it, the crucial justification for some kind of historical hang is that it establishes the kind of framework that then allows for a whole plurality of interpretations.

Velázquez, *Pablo de Valladolid*, 1633, oil on canvas, 210 · 209 · 123 cm. Museo del Prado

Simon Patterson, *The Great Bear (detail)*, 1992, lithograph print

If for Potts an historical display is what makes possible a multiplicity of different interpretations, this strongly implies that the historical display itself, or (a phrase about which he has many reservations) the narrative it tells, is not a matter of interpretation. It depends upon matters of fact, and the dichotomy of fact versus interpretation clearly played a large part in Potts's thinking.

However, Potts combined the view that there is always a fact of the matter to the narrative that any museum hang 'tells' with the view that, for any stretch of art-historical time, there need not be just one narrative that can be legitimately told. Indeed there is highly likely to be more than one narrative, and all this without necessarily any change of interpretation. The point to which Potts was, I felt, drawing our attention was the very interesting one – though he might not put it like this himself – that, in a book or in a lecture, an art-historian will, without any shift in interpretation, weave together a number of sub-narratives, reflecting different interests or perspectives that he might have. However, when it comes to putting paintings on a wall, this is a different case. Each of these different sub-narratives now becomes a narrative in its own right, and demands its own display.

When I put the issue to Elderfield, I got a very different kind of response. In the first place, for him an historical installation is clearly interpretative, and, if we don't see this, it is because, in the spirit of positivism, we reduce the historical to the crassly chronological.

John Elderfield *I happen to think that this is more complicated than often presented. Certainly the historical installation will want to be mainly chronological, but it cannot be strictly chronological or it would not be historical: it would be a sort of chronicle. Charlie Stuckey did a chronological installation for the Art Institute of Chicago a number of years ago, and it certainly wasn't historical, because it had to break up all the historical movements and schools. I don't think that it was finally satisfying, but not because it wasn't historical.*

In voicing his suspicion of the historical hang, and his predeliction for what he called 'other-than-historical' installations, Elderfield was clearly influenced by his recent experience in putting together the cycle of exhibitions, to be called 'Modern Starts', that will occupy three floors of MOMA from this autumn to the spring of next year. These will be devoted mainly to the years 1880–1920, and Elderfield talked about the way he had come to conceive these exhibitions.

JE *I have been thinking about how to present an historical period as other than a rush from beginning to end. For me this meant trying to return the materials to a less orderly state before history ha named and described the styles and the*

movements, and had celebrated selected individuals. It was not possible, obviously, to return the works to their original freshness, but it was possible to try to avoid some of their subsequent historical organisation. This led to the decision to choose a loose organisational principle that preceded the creation of these works – the basic division of subject-matter – rather than any principle that succeeded them. It is not possible to pretend now that their subsequent historical organisation did not exist; one cannot look forward on to a past period. But it might be possible to maintain the fiction that then the new organisation did not exist.

Additionally, to adopt a pre-existing form of organisation allows one to see how the genres that it imposed were challenged in the period at issue, and how it is against them that modern forms struggled to find their definition.

I wondered whether these ideas couldn't be accommodated by invoking Potts's distinction between the way you hang the permanent collection and – what Elderfield is talking about – the way you hang a special exhibition. But, of course, there are a number of places round the world where this very distinction is being called into question. Would it not be fair to say that much of what Serota is doing at the Tate suggests just this?

However, when Potts conceded that there were limits set to the case for an historical hang, the breach between him and Elderfield widened rather than narrowed. For Potts, in making the concession, insisted, as might have been expected, that this was not prompted by interpretative considerations. It just was that, for certain historical reaches, it is far from clear that the facts of the case support any sort of narrative line.

TP *With historical art, with art before our century, the narrative is essentially there. There is a canon of artists that is more or less accepted, though, of course, it's the business of scholars and art historians to continue to investigate and refine and so on that story. The appearance of a major new artist, like a Georges de La Tour or a Vermeer, who casts a whole new light on a period that we thought we knew well, is very much the exception.*

Whereas when you get into the twentieth century, and particularly into the most recent decades, it's not at all clear that there is a narrative to tell, and this for two different reasons. One is perhaps we are just too close to it so that it is too hard to discern, but the other – and this is one of the more interesting, if difficult, aspects of twentieth-century art – is that in places there is not the necessary structure or framework on which to ground a narrative, because the conceptual basis of art in the twentieth century has gone out in so many directions. There is not even a bedrock of principles that distinguishes artistic practice from non-artistic practice, and that can be assumed as common ground between us and our visitors.

Even on its own terms, Potts's argument struck me as less than compelling. For, granted his two premises – that the historical hang reflects the facts of the case, and that, in most periods there are, but in other periods there aren't, the necessary facts to justify it – it doesn't follow, as he seems to think, that some sort of historical hang is the 'default hang', or that where we can do it, it's what we should do. But my reasons for thinking this are nothing to do with what is at issue between Potts and Elderfield. Rather they go back to another concern that I voiced in the lectures. And that is the ever-present danger that an historical hang can, in a very insidious way, oversimplify the development of art. Implicitly the history of art gets retold as a relay race in which a baton, with inscribed upon it 'the conquest of appearances', or 'the assertion of flatness', or some other device, is handed on from artist to artist, each competitor improving upon the performance of his predecessor. I call this form of art-history 'progressivism'.

TP *Yes, I do think that there is a real danger when the art-historical story takes on an aura of inevitability and determinism, which at the time it didn't have. Things could have gone any number of directions. Who knows, without Cézanne, without Monet, what early twentieth-century art would have looked like. It seems to me implausible that we would have had modernism in the same form without a handful of painters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

But the comment that I'd make is that I don't think that to hang a collection historically is ipso facto *a concession to progressivism. This comes only from the interpretation placed upon the sequence of events: the chronology itself carries no such implication.*

For Elderfield, what he saw as Potts's attempt to divide the history of art into an orderly and a disorderly phase was doubly objectionable. He found it hard to accept what he found implicit in Potts's thinking: that the narrative is fairly readily retrievable from historical art, and that the fact that it isn't similarly retrievable from modern art shows some deficiency in modern art. But it seemed to me that Elderfield felt so strongly about this issue because, for him, the unity of art is not a fact about art, but a constitutive value that we bring to art, and to which the museum has to bear witness.

JE *I once had a painting teacher whose own teacher was taught by Sickert who was taught by Degas who was taught by Ingres, and so it went on. I have to confess that I cling to the idea that it is all one art school. And I do believe that, as we enter the next century, we shall become more aware of continuities than of differences. I recently had occasion to read something that Herbert Read wrote about modern art in the 1930s. He said that the changes it had brought were even more than revolutionary, which implies a turning over, were actually catastrophic, which implies 'an abrupt break with all tradition... The aim of five centuries of European effort is openly abandoned', he said. From a present perspective, such an apocalyptic view seems not only hyperbole but sheer nonsense. I know that those who lived through this period did have the sense of participating in a very profound transition indeed. And I know that our own period offers a similar interpretation. Obviously we want to acknowledge the changes, and to celebrate them. But we do not want to promote the myth of contemporary art, any more than of older modern art, as something sequestered and apart. That seems terribly premature, and prejudicial.*

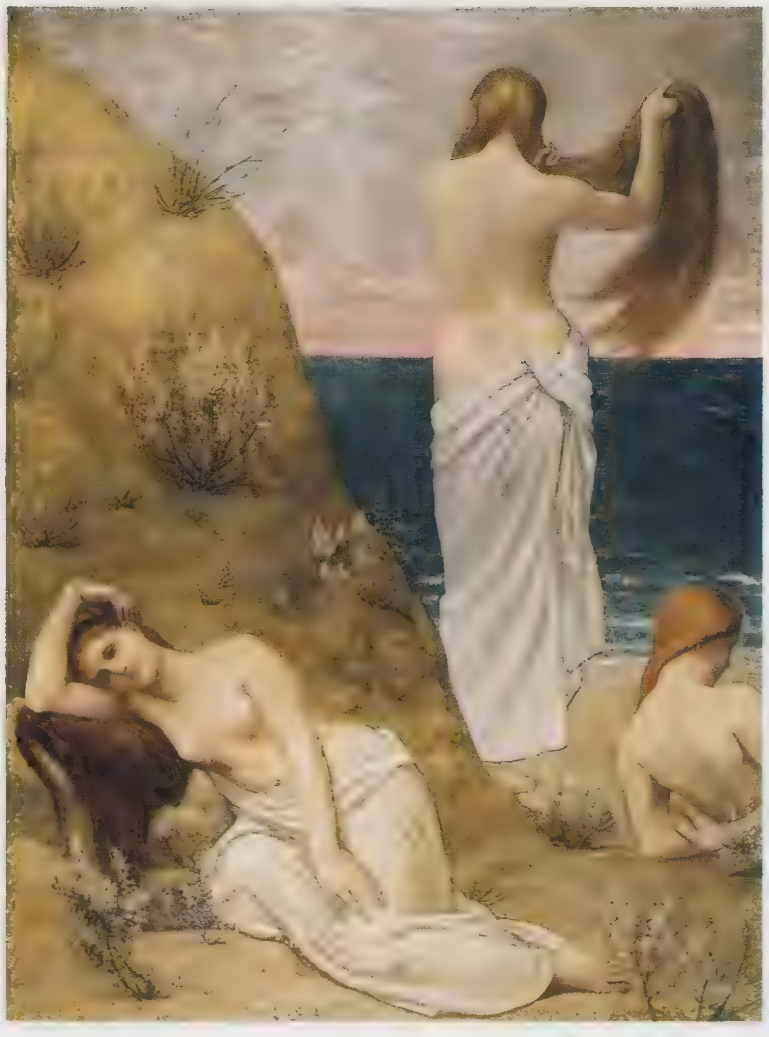
What Elderfield found to say about the notion of unity and the role that it plays in our thinking about the history of art put me in mind of what Meyer Schapiro had to say about its role in our perception of individual works of art. If, as far as this argument was concerned, he and I were in broad general agreement, what he went on to say I found alarming, if in essence not unfamiliar.

JE *I think that we are all engaged, not only in making works of art more accessible to broad audiences, but also in making sure that works of art stay strange and puzzling, which is what will maintain interest in them. So there just have to be new narratives.*

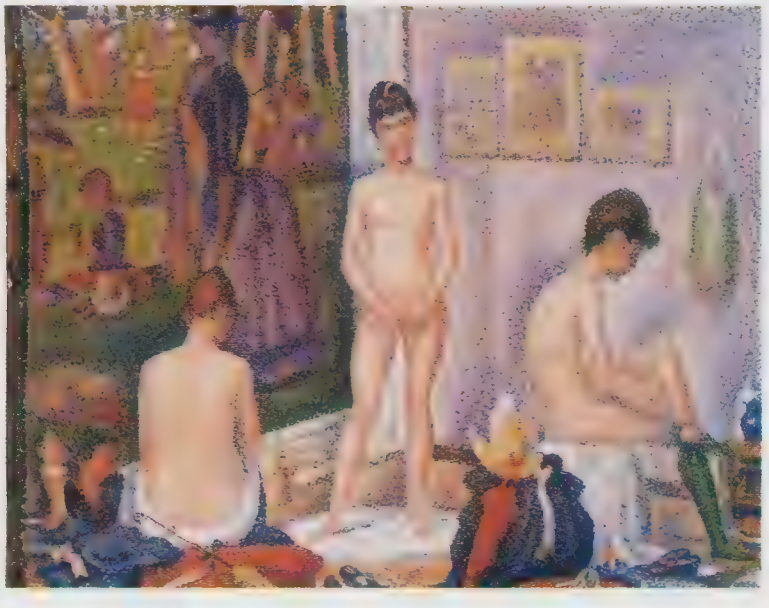
What is clearly true is that, for any one painting, at any rate for any one interesting painting, there will be more than one narrative to tell about it. About Monet's *Nympheas*, there is a backward-looking narrative about colour and brushwork and changing points of view, and also a forward-looking narrative about all-overness and flatness. What is also true is that, for any one narrative, there will be more than one hang to illustrate it. We can, depending on whether we want to emphasise the positive or the negative aspect of the story, hang Seurat next to Impressionism, or what he was (more or less) against, or next to Puvis de Chavannes, or what he was (more or less) for.

But, in this passage, Elderfield is clearly going beyond these often overlooked truths, with which Potts, I am sure, would be perfectly happy. Rather he is suggesting that there is a curatorial obligation to produce ever fresh narratives so that the paintings themselves will look ever fresher. The big question is, is this task to be decoupled from that which I have been assuming is paramount: that of making paintings comprehensible? In other words, is there some merit to a new story, whether or not it is a true story?

I am clear about how Elderfield would answer this question. But I know that there are curators who would give a different answer, and I also know that there are far more curators who would treat the question as illegitimate, in that they would think that there is no issue of a true story, and that all that matters is that the story should lead us to look again. This – besides its philo-



Puvis de Chavannes. *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer*. 1879. oil on canvas. 61 × 47 cm. Museé d'Orsay



Georges Seurat, *Les Poseuses (petite version)*, 1887. 39.4 × 48.7. Bergguen Collection

sophical frivolity – is to write a charter for curatorial self-indulgence.

At this stage, I turned back to something that Potts had said to me. Taking up one of the themes of my lectures – that museums of modern art had the task, the historical task as I saw it, of trying to make it intelligible why they held certain works – I had said that I was now starting to wonder whether the very same task might not now be confronting traditional museums. Are there not museum-goers now who have come to take Beuys and Andy Warhol as the canon – just as their predecessors took the Sistine Madonna and the Venus of Urbino as their canon – and who are disconcerted to be asked to look at works that look radically different?

I didn't mean by this that these people particularly like, or understand, or get something out of, Beuys or Warhol. I was talking of brute exposure. All I meant was that Beuys and Warhol is what they have seen most of, and therefore is their starting-point. However, Potts took me to be rehearsing arguments familiar from the earlier part of this century, when the most committed aesthetes, such as Croce, Valéry and Adorno, asked what we were to make of works that no longer speak to us, and gave different answers.

TP *I think that what underlies some of what you're saying is the assumption that art's engagement with life is fundamental to its interest and that the course of contemporary art is in engaging, in interesting, often provocative, sometimes scandalous ways, with some of the profound issues of contemporary life.*

Now, I don't think that we can argue with the fact that the Old Masters no longer have a direct relevance to our lives. So those of us who believe that the historical object still has value and interest have to change the argument, and it has to be along the lines that art is an essential window and means of insight into what has happened in the past, and that the works themselves do still speak across the centuries. I think one of the gratifying and still observable realities – you only need to walk into the Metropolitan, or the Kimbell, or the National Gallery of London, and you will see that a Caravaggio, or a great Tiepolo or whatever, does still have the power somehow to inspire in viewers who have some degree of visual sensitivity a sense of its quality and importance and grandeur. Now though we all flounder when we try to explain how and why that's so, I'm very pleased that that still is the case.

Both Proust and Freud raised, out of the exigencies of their very different temperaments, the question of how understanding art and enjoying art are related. Is the second, they both wanted to know, dependent on the first? What talking to Potts and Elderfield brought home is that, not only can these deep questions arise within the practical context set by the museum, but ultimately they cannot be avoided.

So long as those in charge of our museums are capable of formulating their own answers to these questions, our museums are in good hands.

1
e.g., 'The Thread of Ariadne and the Web of Arachne', Museum of Modern Art, New York City, November 1997; 'Painting, the Eye and Language', The Roland Penrose Memorial Lecture, Tate Gallery, London, January 1998; and 'Reflexions on Museums and their Future', Speed Memorial Museum, Louisville, Ky., April 1998.

2
Nicolas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: the Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art*, The Walter Neurath Lecture, 1996 (Thames and Hudson, London, 1996).

William Corbett

A Port in Air

The distilled mystery and stilled life of Albert York's rarely seen paintings

Albert York has not produced a painting for sale since June 1992, and there is no reason to believe that he has made a painting since then. In the 35 years he has shown at the only gallery he has ever had, Davis & Langdale on Manhattan's Upper East Side, York either appeared out of the blue carrying new paintings in a shopping bag or sent them in by regular mail from his Long Island home. Otherwise he has kept to himself. Through thirteen shows at Davis & Langdale he has had direct contact with the art world press just once. This occurred in 1995 when York allowed Calvin Tomkins to interview him for the *New Yorker* profile 'Artist Unknown'. There he gave the only public statements he has ever given about his work. When asked by Tomkins why he painted, York replied,

> I think we live in a paradise. This is the Garden of Eden, really it is. It might be the only paradise we ever know, and it's just so beautiful, with the trees and everything here, and you feel you want to paint it. Put it into a design. That's all I can say. It's been a rather trying business, this painting.

So trying that York admitted to being satisfied by only one of his more than 300 paintings, an early one of a young woman standing beside a tree. Looking at his work one would never imagine that York felt this way. His paintings are immensely satisfying and stay in the mind, alive with surprise and delight, long after they have been seen. York is an American original whose images are from another century yet absolutely contemporary. They carry the past into the present in a unique way. York's paintings have the rare quality, rare in any art at any time, to, in the words of Vincent van Gogh, 'retain their calm even in the catastrophe'.

Anecdote of the Jar

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it.
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was grey and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Wallace Stevens

You will find Tennessee on any current map of the United States, but that is not Wallace Stevens's Tennessee. His is a state of the mind. On reading the first line of *Anecdote of the Jar* Stevens's Tennessee is in our imagination, and so is the jar he has placed there. Albert York's paintings enter the imagination with a similar directness. His *Two Anemones in a Landscape* places the impromptu tin-can vase that holds the flowers in an imaginary landscape of bare ground and milky air that is nowhere and everywhere. York's placement is simplicity itself, achieving a just-rightness that resists analysis, as does the mystery, distilled to an essence, that one senses in looking at any of his paintings.

Albert York, *Two Anemones in Landscape*, 1982, oil on masonite, 33 × 30.2 cm

York has as little interest in detail as Stevens, whose jar is 'round' and 'grey and bare'. The tin can is blue-grey, but whether it held tomato sauce or peas before it was recruited as a vase we will never know. It is there and nothing else matters. The anemones, or windflowers – which the ancient Greeks thought sprang from the blood from Adonis, Romans prescribed to prevent fever, and the Chinese associate with death – are creamily painted and dewy in their freshness. Like Stevens's jar, they, in their can, take 'dominion everywhere'. Dominion in the name of the human imagination which Stevens regarded as 'the only genius'. York's work exemplifies this, and so modest, off-hand and confident are his small oil paintings that they do so with uncommon authority.

York's paintings appear to be the work of a 'natural', one who is unworldly but possessing sophisticated technique and an unerring sense of how to place forms in space. He seems not to know what he is doing so much as to discover each painting as he paints it, while somehow keeping the immediacy of his discovery alive in the finished work. The painter Susan Rothenberg, who loves York's work, may have said it best: 'Each time he paints, he paints for the first time'. Could the painter's biography tell us anything that our eyes cannot?

Until Tomkins interviewed York, we knew only the place and year of his birth – Detroit, Michigan, 1928 – and the two schools at which he had been educated, Ontario College of Art and Detroit's Society of Arts and Crafts. Now we know that he saw active duty in the Korean War, and then came to New York where he studied for a short time with the painter Raphael Soyer before going to work in the frame shop of another painter, Robert Kulicke, where he became a first-rate gilder. In the early 1960s York began to paint in Central Park on small wooden panels. Eventually he showed some of

these to Kulicke who saw at once that York was, in his words, 'a great painter'. Kulicke introduced York's work to his friend Leroy Davis, who had a small art gallery. Davis also recognised York's quality and through three name changes and several addresses he and his gallery have championed York's art.

When I first saw York's paintings in the late 1970s at what was then the Davis & Long Company, Davis talked eagerly to me, although I was clearly not a collector, about York, without, as I remember, obscuring the paintings by focusing on the legend of the reclusive painter. When I visited Davis recently, once again he was informative but refused to speculate on whether York might still be at work. He did not need to say that what we already have from York is more than we had any right to expect. Nor did he speak of York's virtues. Davis simply placed York's *Two Anemones in a Landscape* on a stand under a gallery light and let it speak for itself.

Two weeks before this I had been in the basement of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts inspecting the museum's York, *Landscape with Two Indians* (1978). In researching York's life and work, I learned that his only solo museum show had been at the MFA in 1982–3. The museum is ten blocks from my home, and as a frequent visitor for 25 years I had a dim memory of seeing York's work there. When I contacted the museum, they knew of the single York they owned but had no record of a York show. The mysterious retrospective seemed in keeping with the painter's legend. After digging in the MFA's library, I discovered that *Landscape with Two Indians*, a gift from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, had been hung in a group show, 'Contemporary Realist Painting: a Selection'. Since the other paintings in that show were owned by the museum, no checklist existed. I leapt to the conclusion that there had never been a York retrospective.

When I communicated my circumstantial evidence to Roy Davis, he was adamant that there had been a show. He dug up John Russell's *New York Times* review of Fairfield Porter's 1983 retrospective at the MFA, and there I read the following paragraph:

> Visitors to the Boston show should not miss the little exhibition of recent figurative painting. This has been designed as a postscript to the Porter show, and it includes the first museum showing in any depth of the work of Albert York. Even in the Boston Museum, which has great painting the way centipedes have feet, Albert York looks very good.

Armed with this, I returned to the MFA and sought the help of Maureen Melton, the museum's archivist. She put two and two together. The 'exhibition of recent figurative painting' and 'Contemporary Realist Painting: A Selection' were the same show. It opened six weeks before the Porter, closed while his show was still up, and held 48 paintings in all, 21 by Albert York! His only museum retrospective had been folded into another show and given a generic title. Among the company York shone in on that occasion were Willem de Kooning, Alex Katz, Jane Freilicher, Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and York's old employer Robert Kulicke.

Albert York, *Landscape with Two Indians*, 1978, oil on wood panel, 31.7 × 27.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

When *Landscape with Two Indians* was originally shown as Object of the Month in November 1981, it occasioned an unsigned paragraph in the MFA's newsletter, the museum's only written response to the painting that I could find. This described the picture as a 'tiny allegory' recalling the work of Maurice Prendergast and Albert Ryder, and emphasised 'the artist's personal vision, one full of gentle, somber mystery and ambiguity'.

Landscape with Two Indians, which has been in storage since 1983, is on wood, as are the majority of Yorks, and at roughly a foot square it falls in the middle of York's size range which runs approximately from 18' × 16' to 8' × 5'. Like most Yorks, except those collectors have explicitly asked him to sign, it is unsigned, and like many Yorks it is not painted to the edges and has an unfinished look. Two Indian braves stand far enough apart so they are figures in a composition, imaginary Indians not to be confused with the real thing. The season is summer, York's favourite by far, and the braves are posed in front of full-grown trees that are roughly their height. (This is typical of York who elsewhere puts three tulips up front so that they are bigger than the horse and rider behind them. This playing with scale is but one of the 'wrong' notes he likes to hit, wrong in the sense the composer Charles Ives meant when he warned a copyist to stop correcting them as 'All the wrong notes are right!'). Crawling across the ground in front of the braves is a worm-coloured snake, brother to the one in Albert Ryder's *The Race Track*.

If this painting is a 'tiny allegory', and allegory is a term often hung on York's work, it is not easy to say what it intends. This mysteriousness, as with so many Yorks, adds to both the painting's aura and the viewer's pleasure. One possible reading of the two stolid braves is that for Americans the Indian is such a mythical figure that it is nearly impossible to see him as anything other than a character in a story. Another possibility is that whatever the American landscape – this one is as flat as the potato fields near York's Long Island home – the Indian is always present, reminding Americans of

Albert York, *Reclining Female Nude with Cat*, 1978, oil on wood, 23.8 × 31.7 cm

this continent's first human inhabitants and their bloody near-annihilation. The snake? The snake could be read in a host of ways. Perhaps it suggests, above all, that the beauty of such allegories as York commits is that they do not have to come out even, and that like Stevens's jar they are 'a port in air' to be emptied of many possibilities.

From the first serious review by the painter Lawrence Campbell of York's first show, critics have pointed to Ryder as York's chief influence and forebear. There is some evidence that he first encountered Ryder's work in childhood as illustrations in books. We know his reactions to the Ryders he saw at New York's Metropolitan Museum early in his career. 'They were so small, but so strong', he told Calvin Tomkins, 'that they outdid everything else in the room. The whole universe was there in those small pictures. Ryder knew how to fit together the negative and positive forms – clouds, sky, trees, the sea. He locked it all in.' York, too, locks it all in, but he does so with a totally modern stroke.

If the then of a York is in his subject matter, whether that be trees in a field, houses or figures posed outdoors, the now is in his brush. The critic Klaus Kertess, who included York in the 1988 show 'Painting Horizons' that he curated for the Parish Art Museum in Southampton, New York, compared York's paint-handling to that of Philip Guston. Although York is never as lavish as Guston, his surfaces have a similar lustre. We know that on Long Island York has risen at dawn to work. Perhaps he caught some of that first light on his brush. His touch is in love with the medium and wants that love to be on display. You can see this in *Reclining Female Nude with Cat* (1978), York's deliciously witty odalisque. He might have copied the figure from a Manet postcard, and then one of the cats, which, along with dogs, he takes great pleasure in drawing and painting, strolled in. While the image, as with many late Gustons, is instantly recognisable, the paint slows and holds the eye in its sensual, brushy sweep. These paintings, 'small and intense' in Fairfield Porter's words, have appeal for the eye trained by Beckmann and de Kooning.

Given the look of York's paintings, it is slightly odd, but in character, for him to have told Tomkins: 'The modern world just passes me by. I don't notice it. I missed the train'. What York glimpsed of the modern world, the Abstract Expressionism that he says 'froze him' causing him to think, 'What are you doing with your tiny panels?', gave him what he needed, or it was always inside him to paint the way he does. There is no question that his work has not changed, and there will never be monographs entitled 'The Growth and Development of Albert York's Art'. In that sense he may have missed the train, but he did not need to be on it, any more than Thoreau needed to be on the train to Boston. Thoreau travelled widely in Concord, and York has travelled widely within the limits of his work, limits of subject matter and mood that have allowed him to express his peculiar genius because he gave himself to them despite his misgivings.

The calm of a York, what Kertess has called their 'stilled life', relates to these limits. This calm radiates from the 'tiny panels', and seems old-fashioned, or so beyond memory in our stressed moment that we think of it as existing in another time: the time inhabited by York's cows that stand in fields, looking out at us sometimes through the soulful eyes in their archaic heads as they go steadily about their business. What comfort there is in a cow! And in the trees that abound in York's work, nearly always summer trees, full-leafed, still, immemorial and comforting. You can look at them without having them look back at you. As Fairfield Porter wrote, 'He [York] does not 'know' anything better than you who look at the painting'. Yet he seems to know what another of his critics, Bill Berkson, has called 'the peculiar, visible truths' of things. What York does not do is insist, and because we encounter equanimity of this sort so infrequently in twentieth-century American painting, it seems

mysterious. Not an unnerving mystery but the inviting one, good-humoured in its forthrightness, that comes with any allegory that engages us.

All of this, and York's recognisable colour – reds, blues, browns, greys, whites and greens like those we have in mind when we use the words – have brought York's work the intense affection of a small and devoted audience. For years Roy Davis has been able to sell any York that came his way merely by picking up his phone. When Jacqueline Onassis's estate was auctioned off, the three Yorks up for sale – she owned six, the last coming as a gift from her friend Maurice Tempelsman shortly before her death – were the first ever to be auctioned. They were snapped up at prices of over $30,000. Although Davis has not had a York to sell since 1992, his gallery has mounted loan shows in both 1995 and 1998. These are done out of love for the work and to please York's fans, and they are about the only way the public can see a York painting. Four American museums own Yorks, but at present neither Boston's MFA or the Cleveland Museum of Art have their paintings on display. One day before too long, those fortunate enough to be York collectors, many of whom own two or more paintings, will be passing down paintings to their heirs, and some are bound to wind up in museums. But there is no reason why an enterprising museum has to wait to put on a York retrospective. Davis is here to be consulted, and although the quiet virtues of York's work may never attract more than the happy few, one does not need special knowledge to enter a world so easy to embrace. Such a show will happen: why not now?

Albert York, *Self-Portrait Head*, 1979, charcoal on paper, 33 × 33 cm

Albert York, *Grey Cow in Landscape with Pond and Tree*, 1985, oil on wood, 28.9 × 25.7 cm

After I saw *Two Anemones in a Landscape*, I wandered alone uptown to the Metropolitan Museum, thinking only to amble around inside. There I came across a room full of Clyfford Stills. The York had so concentrated my eye that the Stills looked big and empty, their craggy, mountainous heights reaching after the grandeur that York achieves effortlessly. Since World War II, American artists have paraded their ambition as if the scale of their reach must ennoble their art. York is completely different from these artists. There is not a breath of hot air in his paintings nor is any brush-stroke forced. This is painting that comes straight at the viewer, cutting through the catastrophe, whether that be characteristic American afflatus or the intermittently heard nattering that painting is dead. York's paintings accomplish this by their very life, a force that it is impossible to fake, and this life comes from his having immersed himself and his brush in a very few things that he has loved completely. The result is paintings that are beautiful, simple and pure visions of the paradise that each of us might find in this world. York gives us, in Elizabeth Bishop's words: 'The little that we get for free... About the size of our abidance'.

In researching this article I had the help of Leroy Davis and his assistant Michelle Martin, Kathi Drummy of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Beverley Corbett, Bill Berkson, Amy Eshoo and Werner H Kramarsky. I am grateful to one and all.

Lance Esplund

Blood, Sweat and Tears

What is the difference between a flasher and an artist?

I suppose contemporary artists owe more to the confessional TV talk-shows than to Jean-Jacques Rousseau for the *au courant* genre of the tell-all. And if you made the rounds of the New York galleries these past few months, you would have seen works by artists who are pouring out more than their hearts. The summer shows – like the summer heat – stirred up memories of family outings and family outrage, summer sojourns and summer sorrows. And artists are dragging not only their reminiscences and family photos into the galleries; they are bringing their soiled underwear and their used tampons, their blood and their urine.

In Tracey Emin's first US solo show 'Every Part of Me's Bleeding' (in New York this last May and June), viewers encountered a three-room autobiography in the form of writings, drawings and memorabilia, videos, a vacation beach hut, a quilt and a bathtub filled with gin. *The History of Painting*, an installation in the rear gallery, consisted of pregnancy tests, watercolours and five wall-mounted vitrines displaying a week's worth of Emin's used tampons. About the tampons, Emin has explained, 'I think – oh, that's my blood, it comes from my womb. I made that. I made that. That's why it's called *The History of Painting*'. *My Bed*, a sprawling installation resembling a looted window display, is the room's centerpiece; ingredients include: trash, cigarette butts, bed, blue rug, soiled sheets, stuffed animal, dirty underwear, used condoms, hangman's noose... A neon sign emblazoned the room with: 'My Cunt is Wet with Fear'.

Tracey Emin. *My Bed*, 1998, installation: mattress, linens, pillows, rope, various memorabilia. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin, New York

Tracey Emin, like many artists before her, including Piero Manzoni who was canning his own excrement, blood and breath 40 years ago, makes herself into a commodity. Short-listed for this year's Turner Prize, Ms Emin has received numerous accolades for her raw authenticity, for her willingness to stop at nothing when it comes to revealing herself. In 'Every Part of Me's Bleeding' Emin disclosed intimate information about: her bodily functions, her botched abortion and subsequent miscarriage, her rape, the dimensions of her boyfriend's penis, her alcoholism, her sex life, her suicide attempts; but instead of engaging us on common ground, Emin merely confronted us with details.
Emin believes in the power of exposure. She is a flasher. And, as with flashers, there is the quick retreat into the raincoat; for Emin the raincoat is 'art'. Flashers take only minor risks. They count on our being taken by surprise, as they expose everything and reveal nothing. 'Every Part of Me's Bleeding' may show us Emin's 'privates', but the work is so self-absorbed, so self-referential, that you get the feeling she is afraid to allow the work to have a life outside her. This multi-media diary does not come into its own, because of the limitations imposed by Emin's own suffocating presence.

Emin works within the genre of autobiography, of self-portraiture, and probably believes that she is redefining the genres. In good autobiography and self-portraiture tensions arise through relationships between what is revealed and what is not, and, as importantly, how things are revealed. In Emin's work, you get the sense that she had vomited it all up and said, 'Deal with it'. When autobiography becomes art, it can happen that you feel as if the words were written just for you; that, in fact, the words – or the expression on a face – belong to you, not the author. Watching *The Interview*, a video of a split-Emin – as self-loving on one side and self-loathing on the other – I was struck by its utter artificiality. In

Joan Snyder, *Oratorio*, 1997, mixed media on canvas. Courtesy: Nielsen Gallery. Photo: Zindman/Fremont

contrast, I am reminded here of a passage from Kierkegaard's diary:

> I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; witty banter flowed from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me – but I came away, indeed that dash should be as long as the radii of the earth's orbit ——————————
> —— wanting to shoot myself.

Joan Snyder was a featured artist in a group show last spring curated by Carter Ratcliff and Kim Sobel, entitled 'Immediacies of the Hand: Recent Abstract Painting in New York'. The show included fifteen artists, and was spaciously hung in a number of large, connecting galleries. Many of the artists were younger, early career painters. Notable was Rosanna Bruno's *Blue Bayou*, which invokes similar feelings for space to Pollock's *The Deep*; Louise Fishman's *April*, with its muddy browns and stark blues and whites, suggests that clear-skied hopefulness between winter and a first thaw. The exhibition also included two paintings by Anthony Viti. Viti has no feeling for painting, but he paints with his own blood and urine.

Orchard and *Oratorio*, Joan Snyder's two paintings included in that exhibition, commanded a whole room as they faced each other from opposite ends of a long gallery. To stand before these two works was to experience wave after wave of associations. When Snyder grids off *Oratorio* into separate rectangles, each has a uniqueness that adds up collectively into an emotive *tour de force* on the grand scale of history painting. I know of no other contemporary artist who can take a veristic approach to such heights. In these paintings, Snyder employs spikes, plastic grapes, mud, velvet, weeds, all held together with an expressionist's feel for paint and a classicist's sense of order. *Oratorio* takes us on a journey through divergent worlds that keeps each new experience as frontally immediate as the last. Every element retains its singularity, its history, but has the elasticity to cross into the iconic, the symbolic, the illusionistic, all simultaneously.

In this painting, a giant sunflower, scary face, phantasmic house, full moon and bleeding heart all sing to one another, and to us, from this metaphoric choir. The sunflower – bright and beautiful – bursts forth like trumpet blasts. An ocean rages above a sunken heart. Velvet is so close to spikes, and spikes so close to flowers that we are kept on an edge between a myriad of textures, smells, feelings and memories; between coming too close and being pushed too far. 'To Transcend' has been scrawled in a ghost-like hand across the painting; perhaps it speaks of the little red flowers that transform into buds, into bullet holes, into kisses.

In Snyder's work, there is an ever-pressing personality that cannot be ignored. Snyder bares herself, cuts open her heart, and through it we emerge engaged and very alive. Because we feel Snyder's hand in every decision, and because she works with a full-octave range, taking us step-by-step through her personal and pictorial discoveries, we trust her immensely. Of course, Snyder can go over the top, but then her excessiveness becomes our excessiveness, and we forgive her. Moving through one of her paintings is like doing a kind of exploratory surgery; we seem to cut where Snyder cut, to heal as she healed. The paintings are living bodies, stained with life: blushing, scabbing, scarring. They show their age.

New York slows down in the summer. Galleries shorten their hours, take weekends off, and some even close completely. For others, it's time for their group shows, the family get-together, so to speak. And if a gallery shows its entire stable, you are usually in for some nice surprises; some of the lesser-known or newer gallery members can outshine the more seasoned veterans. Summer is also a time when galleries bring in guest curators, as Matthew Marks did with artist Robert Gober who curated a group exhibition that's got everybody talking.

Gober has recognised the gallery-as-family metaphor, and taken it one step further in a show that begins and ends with adolescent clichés. Despite Gober's sexist bad taste, he actually brought one piece of exceptional art into the gallery, one of the best things I've seen in Chelsea this summer: Anni Albers's *Black, White, Grey* (1927), a stunning cotton and silk geometric weaving belonging to the Museum of Modern Art.

Gober's concept for this group exhibition was that Albers's weaving would represent 'mother', i.e. handiwork, crafts, domesticity *et al*. The 'father' is represented by Robert Beck's *Untitled (The*

Spike Buck) (1995), a three-and-a-half-minute video of Beck's father as he grunts and groans, and hand-saws through the severed head of a deer on snow-covered steps, attempting to remove the antlers (possibly a nod to Gober's use of severed limbs in his own installations). The monitor is placed on top of a raw-wood sawhorse to give it that manly, workshop ambiance. (I don't know what was worse: the fact that Matthew Marks had no air-conditioning or that loud, incessant sawing.)

'Mom' (Albers) and 'dad' (Beck) face each other from opposite ends of the gallery, separated by Cady Noland's *Stand-In for a Stand-In*, a corrugated cardboard box sculpture sporting circular holes that act as keyholes through which you can view the Albers or the Beck. On each side wall is a painting by Joan Semmel (mom and dad after the lights go out), each is a no-colour illustrative painting of two nudes, closely (Pearlstein) cropped, unenthusiastically groping each other. In the back gallery (the kids' room) are a number of small gelatin silver prints of toddler's T-shirts by Nancy Shaver.

There is a sense of isolation in this show, as each personified work, so physically distant from the others, seems unable to communicate beyond its own

Eleanor Steinadler, *Wandering Memories*, oil on paper, 35.5 × 45.7 cm. Courtesy Caelum Gallery, New York

Anni Albers, Robert Beck, Cady Noland, Joan Semmel, exhibition curated by Robert Gober, July 5 – September 10, 1999. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Maria Miesenburger, *Untitled (Fairy Tale)* from the series *Sverige/Schweden*, 1998, chromogenic dye coupler print, 90.17 – 137.16 cm. Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York

personal space. The Albers is the only work in this group with enough punch to carry from one end of the gallery to the other, upsetting the notion of familial silences. Albers's rhythmic rectangles even have enough *vibrato* to drown out Beck's sawing. Stanchions and ropes section off Albers's weaving (a stipulation of MOMA's), and it adds to the overall feeling of confinement. One wonders, though, if Gober even took this into consideration. Even the tension set up by the feeling of separateness is short-lived, and this theme denies the individuality of the works by pigeon-holing them as 'mom' or 'dad', limiting the boundaries of viewers' own interpretations. In this show Gober appropriates others' works with a kind of glib disrespect. I'm reminded of dead movie stars whose film clips are manipulated for beer commercials.

Before Romanticism, there seems to have been an unwritten rule that artists should keep a certain distance, but over the last 200 years, they have made themselves increasingly the subjects of their work. We shouldn't be surprised that, after Freud, so many roads in art lead both to the sob story and back to the womb. Eleanor Steinadler, who exhibited a body of paintings under the title 'Wandering Memories', heaps paint onto her canvases until they resemble rough stone. Then she carves phrases into each wet surface so that the text reads like graffiti and a child's first letters: 'Sad Mother', 'Father No', 'Myra Cries', 'Lost Love', 'Dead'. Steinadler relies too heavily on the power of these vague aphorisms. By scraping and clawing into the paint, she attempts to establish a one-to-one relationship between the scarred skin of the painting and the scarring memories she wants to evoke; to establish a connection between the childish hand and the child's suffering.

Maria Miesenburger's haunting photographs of her childhood, on view at Robert Mann Gallery, have the emotional texture of an Ingmar Bergman film. These sepia prints, slightly blurred and subdued, set up charged contrasts submerged in minor keys. Like low, tremolant music, forms seem to vibrate between clear solid mass and diffusion.

Miesenburger starts with old family photos taken by her father in Sweden when she was still a child. Some of the prints in this show undoubtedly have images of the artist hidden within them, and knowing that she has manipulated the images of her childhood adds to their bittersweet aftertaste. Miesenburger's process involves inking out the figures in the photos, reshooting the photographs, and blowing them up slightly out of focus. There is a danger in this hook, and I don't imagine this series can be sustained, but for now Miesenburger seems to be on to something where the risks of redundancy up the ante with each new work. Although some of the photographs have more power than others, for now, the process doesn't overwhelm the pieces, and each image retains its individuality.

Looking at other people's family photographs gives us a sense of familiarity and of alienation at the same time. Miesenburger allows us entry into these images by silhouetting the people from her own past into blackness, anonymity. The images retain their personal histories, as they become universal stages for our own childhood dramas. Miesenburger is an artist extremely sensitive to edges – both of forms and of time and place. She doesn't simply blacken out an entire figure. She softens the edges, playing with the light and volume so that they seem to breathe. At their centres the figures disappear; at their edges they round into being, merging with their surroundings. The handmade frames are simple and austere, a matte, pale, ivy, that in certain light loses its colour altogether. The overall experience is one of a petrifaction of the past, and memories that are just out of reach.

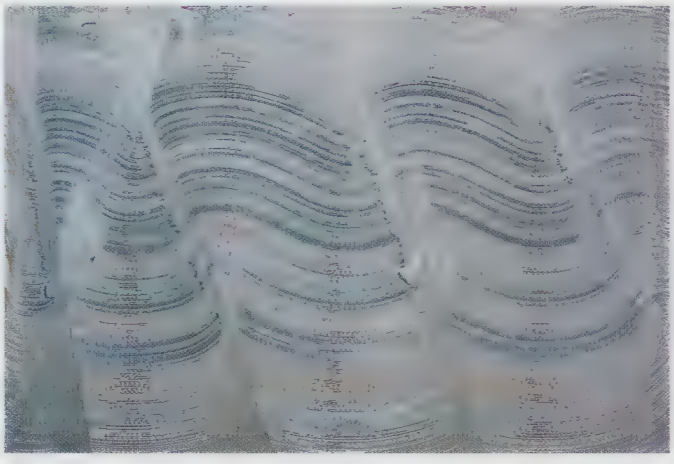
It is these very qualities that remind us of Bergman who mastered that intangible area between childhood, in all its wonder, anticipation and fear, and adulthood, with its sense of both arrival and of loss. In a Bergman film, we can experience parallel worlds, equally tangible: one belonging to the child and one to the adult; but accessible to us all. As in dreams, boundaries between fantasy and reality, past and future, dissolve, and we see again through the eyes of the child.

Tracey Emin will be included in 'Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection', 2 October – 9 January 2000, Brooklyn Museum of Art, USA. Sponsored by Christie's in association with *Time Out* New York.

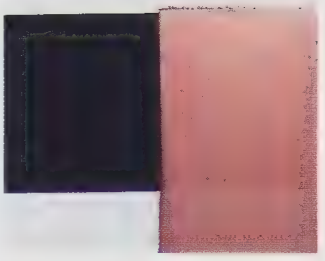
Gallery

by Karen Wright

'Celia Paul: Recent Drawings and Prints' will be at Marlborough Fine Arts, 20 October–26 November. I should declare an interest here, being a confirmed fan of Celia's work as well as a friend. For me her work has a special appeal when she ventures outdoors. Pictured here is *Little Walberswick 2*.

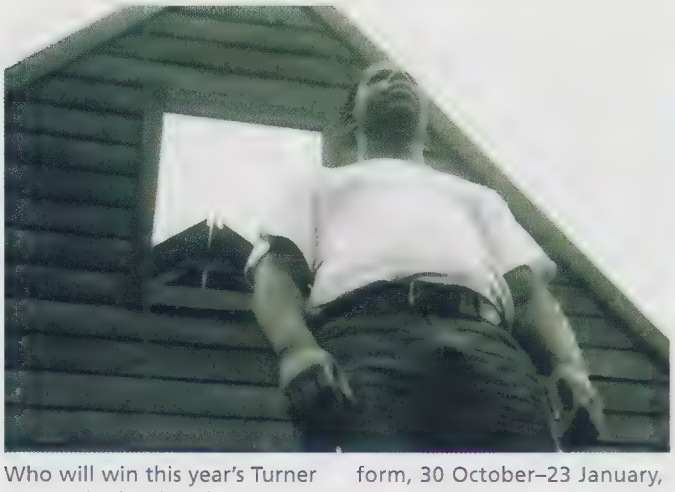


Jason Martin has his third solo show with Lisson Gallery, 16 September–23 October. Whippy little numbers like *Ripper* are a mere eight by twelve foot, and are painted in acrylic on aluminium so should look ultra glam.



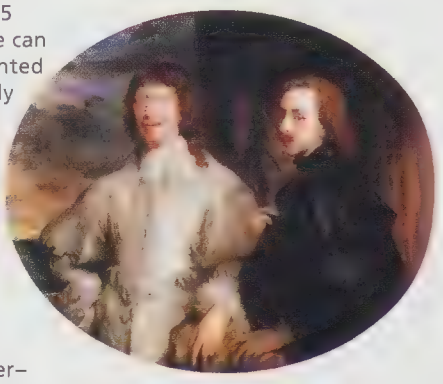
Cumbria is lucky to have the Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal. Its ambitious contemporary art programme continues with 'New Paintings by Callum Innes', 28 September– 24 December. Scottish based Innes continues to produce serene, seemingly simple works like *Exposed Painting Paynes*.

England and Co are in new premises at 216 Westbourne Grove, London. One-man show by perennial *Modern Painters* favourite Albert Herbert, including *Tree of Life*, is mid-November – 23 December.

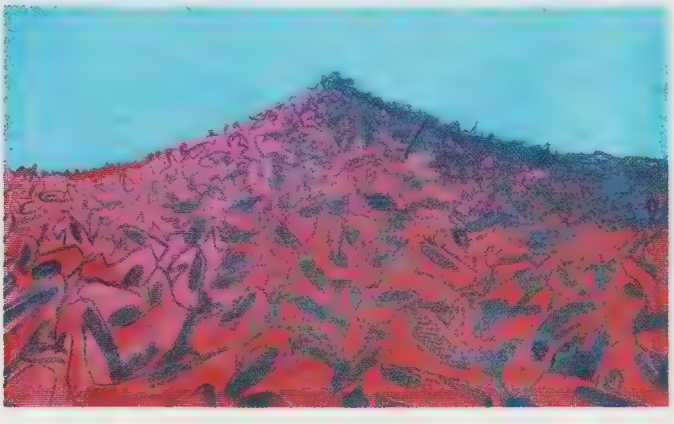


Who will win this year's Turner Prize? The bookies have Steve McQueen as front runner, but *Modern Painters*' money is on our Tracey. Other contenders include Stephen Pippen and Jane and Louise Wilson. You can see the show at the Tate in its ever bigger and better form, 30 October–23 January, and also a two-woman show by the twins, Jane and Louise, at the Serpentine Gallery, 14 September–31 October. Make-your-mind-up-Turner-day is 30 November. Pictured is Steve McQueen's *Deadpan*.

Anthony d'Offay hosts a show of new paintings by Howard Hodgkin, 12 November–15 January. What more praise can one heap on our be-knighted artist? Just enjoy his lovely paintings, including this

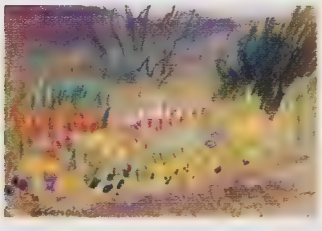


The big historical show of the autumn is van Dyck at the Royal Academy until 10 December. Celebrating the 400th anniversary of van Dyck's birth, it includes such masterpieces as *Endymion Porter with the Artist*.

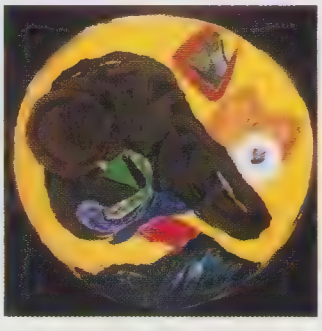


Absolut continues to sponsor 'Absolut Secret' at the Royal College of Art: viewing, 25 November–1 December; first day of the sale, 2 December 8.30am (sale continues until 5 December). Go and choose a post-card and you may have a work by a famous artist or by a student; all prices are the same. The good news is all the money from the sales goes to set up bursaries for the RCA's Fine Art students. Pictured is the anonymous but highly recognisable image by?

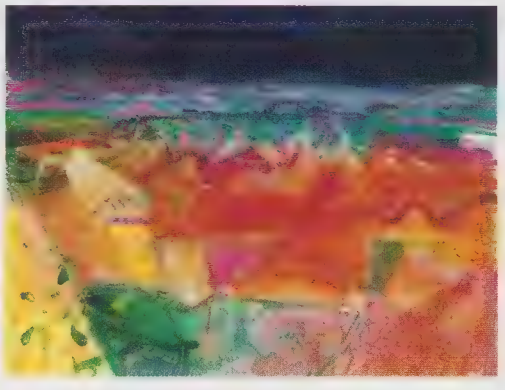
'Neurotic Realism: Part Two' opens at the Saatchi Gallery, 16 September, and continues until 5 December. Emerging young British artists include Dexter Dalwood, Peter Davies, Mark Hosking, Tom Hunter and David Falconer, a detail of whose *Vermin Death Stack* is illustrated here. 'Like the tornado from *The Wizard of Oz* Falconer whips up a column of dead rats standing 10 feet tall and looking horribly real', trembles the press release.



Charles Camoin (1879–1965) shows at Connaught Brown, 14 October–19 November. When you see these works on paper it is no surprise to learn that he was a friend and colleague of Henri Matisse. Spending long periods of time in the south of France produced such sensuous works as *Le jardin*.



Newly appointed Professor of Painting John Hoyland has a retrospective in the Sackler Rooms at the Royal Academy, 30 September–31 October. The paintings are larger than life, a bit like their creator. Go and enjoy the pulsating colour and shapes – of *Ark*, for example. concurrently Hoyland has a show in the newly opened Gallery Fine, Grosvenor Street, London.



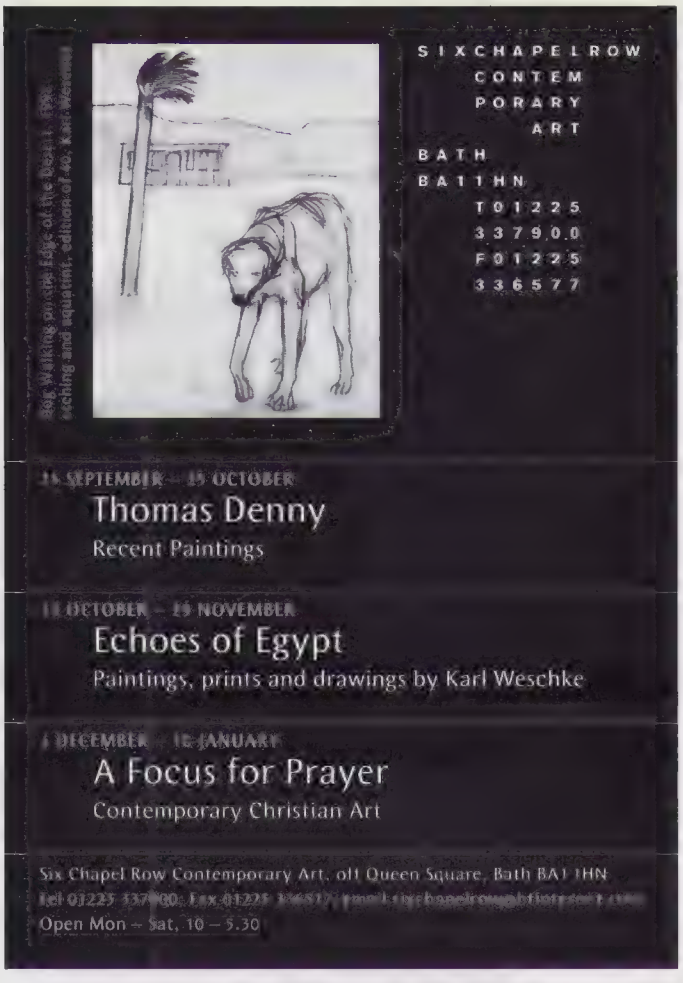
Scottish artist Barbara Rae was let loose in Arizona's *Painted Desert* to produce work for her show at Art First, 2–25 November. The results are delicious works such as *Painted Desert*.

'Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art' is at MOMA Oxford until 3 October, and then travels to Sydney, Australia, in December.

The impact of the great director on a generation of artists is clear, as witness David Reed's *Judy's Bedroom*.

No living artist has so consistently been named as Prunella Clough, as deserving of greater fame. Her show at Kettles Yard (until 26 September) and then at Sheffield Graves Art Gallery, 4 December–22 January, supports this claim. Recent gems include *Disused Land*. She is also a short-listed artist for the Jerwood Prize. The winner will be announced on 21 September and the exhibition will run at the Jerwood Gallery until 24 October.

'Joel Shapiro: Sculpture 1974–1999' is worth a special trip to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park – until 17 October inside and out, and until 27 February 2000 outside. This is Shapiro's first major show in England since his Whitechapel appearance in 1980. This lyrical yet sturdy work is an untitled bronze from 1998. If you're not up north, the Roche Sculpture Park near Salisbury also has some Shapiro bronzes installed until January 2000. Visit this new gallery designed by Munkenbeck and Marshall.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Jack Milroy in the Cévennes

A S Byatt

The light in the Cévennes is not the liquid golden light that bathes Provence. It is airy and violent, sometimes clear and burning, sometimes full of racing movements, high wind, bright or black cloud. The people who lived here worked in stone and iron and wood, building terraces of stone into empty mountainsides, making rooftrees of huge chestnut trunks. Northerners come here to bathe in light and then see that the inhabitants build heavy, closed buildings as a protection against it. They make small windows and close their ponderous shutters against the light at midday. Their buildings have not changed much, over the centuries; there is even a sense of continuity between whoever carried the menhirs and dolmens, and whoever carried all the stone blocks that are built, and demolished, in the stone walls that snake across the empty mountainsides.

Jack Milroy's drawings, graphite on paper, are about the interior darkness and the penetrating light. He made them, as he says, by pinning the paper onto huge ancient doors, so that the forms and impressions of the massive wood and metal appear through the images of spaces and doorways. The drawings have their solidity: the thick sheen of the soft graphite that catches the light from different angles, black, silver or pewter depending on how the light falls, the grains of the wood underneath the intrusion of forms coming up from under, hasps like Celtic serpents, or the mouths of Viking prows, or formal twining creepers, diamond-shaped bosses that scar the dark paper and almost tear it. The grains of the wood of the different doors give different impressions – smooth and planed, carved formally, rough like layers of stone or, of course, coal, which is fossilised wood, black, compressed.

Out of these surfaces Jack Milroy has made images of empty darkness, lit by shafts and filterings of the white light. A diptych shows both sides of the same space, with the same leaning forms seen from different angles – a stick, a ladder. The subject is the dark empty space, our knowledge of it built out of what surrounds it, and from the solidity of the rubbed paper. There are rounds and curves of human construction – hanging curls of piping, ghostly bicycle wheels, a hammock, a tiny glimpse of regular sun-baked tiles on a roof through a window. The forms of the trees persist in the ladders and the beams, and reappear in the rubbings. There is one human form, the barely perceptible vanishing shadow of a woman, in *Door, Space, Partner and View*. The drawings are about absences. One which is not part of the group, but is related to it, is a rubbing of an overcoat on a hanger against a door, which Milroy made shortly after the news that his partner has motor neurone disease. It is a military-style coat, with epaulettes and buttons whose rubbed images, with their crossed threads, look like tiny swastikas. The soft material appears to be vanishing into or underneath the door. The sharp metal things – the hanger, the hinge – appear to be eating or destroying the substance of the cloth. The lapels and the cuffs persist when the folds waver.

The textures of the working of the drawings are extremely subtle and, under the monumental quality, delicate. As Ruskin pointed out, all light in drawings has to be made from the whiteness of paper, and Milroy's patches of light are worked with pencil, or touched with fine scratched lines, so that the glimpsed outside world may have the softness of a Samuel Palmer, the suggestive minimal hint of a Japanese print, or the window-framed brightness of a Rembrandt etching. The door-surfaces may be lightly or heavily touched, so that one, at least, is dappled with patches of clarity, like a Monet dappling of light in shade. The archetypal moon-shapes of hammock and round window, sickle and circle, are also soft and shining like Palmer. Northern artists are interested in blackness in light. Matisse went to Nice and painted a black window. Van Gogh wandering through the sulphurous light of Provence meditated on the use of black as a colour. When I first saw Jack Milroy's drawings I thought irresistibly of Piranesi's *Carceri*. There were the monumental pillars, the deceptive distances, the stairways and closed vistas, there the dangling ropes and wheels. Milroy tells me that this comparison never entered his mind. Indeed, the spaces of Cévenol houses, barns and châteaux, although monumental, are more domestic in their emptiness, more inhabited by slow time and long vanishing than Piranesi's massive nightmares. There is something of the same need to make sense of the difficulty of orientation. The *Carceri* have the unreality of dreamed traps. These are drawings of the real world, the impermanence of solid matter and the permanence of brightness.

Jack Milroy,
Door, Space, Partner and View,
from a series drawn between
1985 and 1999,
graphite on paper,
230 × 180 cm

'Jack Milroy: Portals', until 16 October, Stephen Lacey Gallery, London.

Victor Pasmore's Wandering Journey 1908–1998

Derek Hyatt

Dappled sunlight on stone. A fast dark shadow crosses the apple. Above my head in the branches a bird sings sweetly. I shall let this essay evolve through a series of metaphors, memories and analogies. Follow the journey of the growing branch out into space, see how nature changes her mind in mid-air. This is the way Paul Klee worked, and the method adopted by Victor Pasmore over many years. They both wished to balance the mental clarity of geometry with the way sensual organic nature behaved. They both walked the same tightrope of modern art.

Forty years ago when we moved to our present house, we ordered a set of trees and shrubs through the mail. We opened the packet and laid out the plants on the lawn, naming them. Which is the magnolia tree? Is it this one? About six inches high with pale roots. It's now twelve foot, and the main trunk measures eight inches around. It flowers briefly in spring for five or six days, night frosts willing – a clear demonstration each year of the cycle of nature. What is happening is structurally clear and memorable: a living diagram of forces, nature as machine, beauty, fragility and power. Paul Klee's image of the artist as a tree is a good one.

The carefully constructed metaphoric art of Victor Pasmore shows a respect for the unexpected creative processes of both art and nature. Metamorphosis is a keyword. With luck all forms in nature grow to fulness before they fade: tree, flower, sunset or a woman's body – all key Pasmore images recurring over the years. Like Turner's, Pasmore's art is never abstract. That word abstract in art writing continually betrays the intent of our finest imaginative artists.

By abstract, do we mean art without reference to the world outside art? Or do we mean purified form, intensity of form and colour (the magnolia at its most beautiful) – or are we searching for a language of visual metaphors where one form stands for several: circle = sun = apple = breast; spiral = whirlpool = galaxy?

By modern art I mean prehistoric art rediscovered. I mean the thread of respect, mystery and power that goes back to a time before words, when simple diagrammatic images and patterns could thrill or frighten our ancestors with a strange sense of possibility.

In 1985 Victor Pasmore completed a mysterious dark green painting of interlocking shapes he called *Wandering Journey* (shown this summer in the Marlborough Gallery's tribute to the artist, along with other large and wonderful paintings). Some shapes slightly overlap, some rest on each other, some lock into each other like a jigsaw. Our eyes move fast over these forms, and then slowly, exploring their suggestions. The whole image has the wit and density of a topiary hedge. Is this a Tantric diagram for meditation or a plan for a maze? Do we sense mythology or folklore or seasonal ritual (green man mating with green woman perhaps)? Bright eyes look out at us from the green. It could even be Susannah and the Elders? The image is playful and friendly, then it changes to being serious, ambiguous, questioning.

The Pasmore exhibition currently at the Liverpool Tate celebrates the artist's role in 'Changing the Process of Painting', his own singular adventure from sensitive figuration, through construction, to abstraction: that's the official version. But I would venture that, contrary to received opinion, Victor Pasmore did not 'go abstract' in 1948: he just moved from prose to poetry. His idiom and ways of working shifted, but his subjects remained constant.

Pasmore's subjects across a lifetime are the Earth Goddess (in her many guises), light on water, flesh and stone; landscapes seen through veils of mist and vapour;

Victor Pasmore, *Wandering Journey*, 1985, oil on canvas mounted on board, 30.5 × 40.6 cm. Courtesy Marlborough Fine Art

architectural clusters reminding us of Mediterranean hill villages and close-knit communities. These subjects haunted St Ives artists of the late 1950s. Peter Lanyon's art is the crossroads for much similar thinking. Perhaps if Pasmore had strengthened his early links with St Ives he would be better known and celebrated today. Certainly his presence there would have consolidated the principles of Constructivist thinking after Naum Gabo left for America, and St Ives artists today might be doing more than rearrange brushstrokes and textures.

When a major artist dies, art history closes around him. Journalistic articles simplify his life; the same old facts, stories and quotes put his art in prison. Add to this some well-meaning but ridiculously simplified teaching projects mimicking abstraction and one understands why our society still undervalues modern art and its power for good.

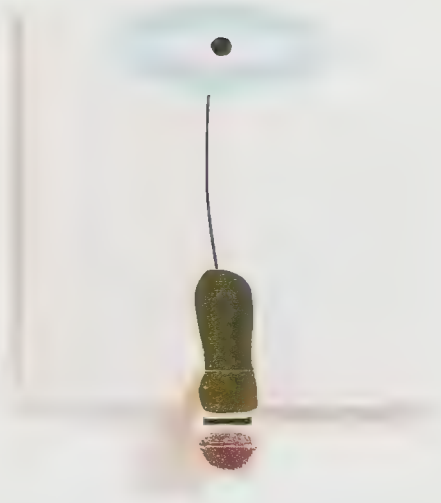
Modern art, in some forms, can sensitise people to the healing delights of colour, space, movement and joy (just as the recent solar eclipse 'changed the life' of a witness interviewed on TV). Pasmore spent much of his life in the spotlight daring to stand up publicly for the ideals of Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian and others. Across 60 years he put together over 20 written statements and interviews on his beliefs. He believed that Expressionism in all its forms muddied the waters, and was self-indulgent (and this included Picasso). It is still possible, he said, even today, for art to stand for the human values we most admire.

The archaeologist Robert Erskine once said to me, 'Idiom is the least important aspect of a work of art'. I can remember exactly where I was standing in his gallery in Cork Street when he said that, 40 years ago, it was such a shock. In 1958, London art then seemed to be all about Style and Pop and Mass Media and Personalities and being up with the game. My regular visits to the British Museum collections, (especially the Egyptian Rooms) dispelled these illusions.

Hokusai had an idea that every ten years an artist should change his name; get out from under his or her reputation and style, and start afresh. The painter might go back exactly to the kind of images, places and people that mean most. Shed everything but the seeds of true feeling. Prepare a huge board with layers of primer, glaze with warm and cold yellows and go into deep memory. Or make a video of shadows – underwater, shadows inside the river. Move in on those images that have lain dormant for years.

Like the poet Coleridge, Pasmore went to Malta to renew himself. The archaeology of Malta thrilled him: modern art 3000 BC. The hand-drawn parallel banding on prehistoric artefacts appears often in Pasmore's art. It is a timeless device to give lightness, generate rhythm and speed, produce optical instability like light on water, and to quicken objects with life.

In *The King Must Die*, Mary Renault



Victor Pasmore, *Subjective Image in White, Green, Blue and Violet*, 1974, paint on wood on panel, 42 × 42 × 12 cm

describes the stranger who arrives on the island. He is made welcome, incredibly welcome; he becomes the consort and lover of the Queen herself. He can't believe his luck. Eventually he realises he is part of a yearly ritual and in spring he will be sacrificed and ploughed into the earth to continue its fecundity. Rosemary Butcher's haunting dance-work *Touch the Earth*, toured by the Arts Council fifteen years ago, has the same theme. I saw it four times at different venues. On TV it was filmed in an underground car park and it still worked its magic. Slow rhythmic stroking of the Earth. Slow rhythmic actions of sowing and reaping.

I'm trying to put Pasmore in a new context – to free him from the art historical cliché. Many of Pasmore's images are sensual and sexual. Perhaps therefore they work on us best when masked or veiled. As ritual images, they need temples or at least defined spaces. Many of his shapes echo prehistoric art-forms and symbols, with the presence of the Earth Mother hovering behind all of them.

Look at *Subjective Image in White, Green, Blue and Violet* (1974). Do you see what's happening? Its sexual symbolism is so clear, but if you limit it to that, you lose its larger, even 'cosmic' and 'spiritual', suggestiveness. Shall we go on calling such works abstract art?

Prehistoric art was about hunting, crop growing, animal rearing and sympathetic magic. Every time those ancestors drew a pattern it was a ritual act, a sign to the Gods. How can we know? Imagine their world, the huge darkness beyond the circle of the fire. Anything, any aid, to ensure survival, fertility, continuity. Their average life span, with luck, might be 30 years.

When I talked with Victor Pasmore in Malta in 1992 he said, 'I've tried every way, now I'm free. Now I'm over 80 I shall do my child art'. I thought he meant more direct drawing, or a mix of idioms that children have no problem with – but perhaps he meant his art would acknowledge the way young children see and feel the world. Very young children cannot focus beyond a few feet. When they begin to walk they see, not in full depth to the horizon, but out to the objects in their path of exploration – measuring, touching, feeling rough and smooth, warm and cold. This is not art history: it is everyone's personal history.

Pasmore's hero, Turner, never lost his childhood awareness of a world of substances and light. Light turns our minds on as well as our bodies. In the 1960s thoughtful experimental artists took aspects from the behavioural sciences and tested them out in visual ways – not to be clever or modern, but to humanise their art. The human figure was implied in the presence of the viewer who experienced art as if meeting another person. 'Life is meeting', said the philosopher Martin Buber.

Pasmore's shapes began to flatten, expand and rear up to confront us. He tested his images as public murals inside real space and changing light amidst human movement and scale. These murals had the colours of cave art: black, white, red. Red for blood, danger. Man as hunter in the tower block. For me, the art of Victor Pasmore opens out into the prehistoric sites across Europe – and hovers around the vandalised Pavilion of Apollo that he made for Peterlee New Town.

Every art student across the country who has experienced a Foundation course researching basic forms owes a debt to Pasmore's visionary teaching and determination. He is not in a box labelled Euston Road School or Abstract Art. His wonderfully poetic riverside visions of the Thames at Hammersmith are only one chapter of his wandering journey. He continually moved on and out into new spaces.

The Tate show at Liverpool lays out beautifully Pasmore's ambition for art. Visitors say, 'These are beautiful paintings, so calm and poetic – but why didn't we know about him?' For many people he is a real discovery. Unless our education at all levels begins to define sign and symbol, map and metaphor, then our responses to art like Victor Pasmore's will remain less than they might be. When we look at hieroglyphics and heraldry we know we have to *know* the code. I want to look and feel, *and* I want to understand how art connects with my life.

The mass media continually distort the purposes of art. Our art education in schools could do better. Will the battle over Education Education Education mean recognition for Art, Music and Dance? (I fear this is just a rhetorical question.) In all civilisations before our own these were the most celebrated of human skills. Our museums and galleries should show exhibitions of the calibre of 'Victor Pasmore' for long periods. The Liverpool show could not be bettered as a display of some of the basic principles of modern art, where one person's passion fused so many styles into visual poetry.

Pasmore continues 'the long tradition'. He challenges young artists to pick up the baton and run. Don't think art is clever-clever idea sheets. Visit Albert Dock at

night. Draw the dancing shapes of moonlight on water. Art is a man or woman pointing at life.

On the floor below Pasmore, the visitor to Albert Dock will find a whistle-stop tour of Modern British Art. Tate leaflet quote:

> Stop off to enjoy old favourites by Barbara Hepworth, Francis Bacon and Henry Moore ... pause to contemplate major recent works by Damien Hirst, Catherine Yass and Mona Hartoum. On display until March 2000, 'Modern British Art' gives you the opportunity to return, reconsider, find new favourites and make predictions on what will happen next.

Mystic Meg visits Merseyside? Each exhibit stands for a movement, a concept, a theme, an attitude, an ism. (Is an ism different from an ology? Ask BT). Some artworks bear this great responsibility with a smile or a shrug. Some exhibits were done for private, tender reasons, not to change the world. Peter Blake's *On the Balcony* is about everyone's childhood and not about Pop Art. Art has become entertainment, self-promotion and showground, with the artist as star, the artwork as product. A ten-year-old boy goes by saying 'I've seen all this stuff before'. Visitors spend longer viewing the same work on the VDU (and reading notes) than looking at the real thing.

In Sheffield recently at the Mappin Gallery was a Saatchi (second eleven) 'Sensation' show. A mile away at the Graves Gallery the magnificent Stanley Spencer *Zaccharias and Elizabeth*, recently bought jointly by the Tate, London, and Sheffield, was shown deservedly in a room of its own. A Masterpiece.

Survey shows are useful structures for curators and students but they emphasise generalisations, groups and labels. The loners get lost: Stanley Spencer, L S Lowry, Edward Burra, David Jones, Winifred Nicholson and, today, Norman Adams and Sonia Lawson. Groups go for big ideas, but it's the loners who touch us with their intensity. Like Pasmore – who in his eighties painted *The Song of Life*, birds on branches, a river of green leaves – they do not seem alone if we relate them to wider and older concerns of human life.

'Victor Pasmore: Changing the Process of Painting', until 20 March 2000, Tate Gallery, Liverpool.

'Victor Pasmore', until March 2000, The Art Institute of Chicago.

'Modern British Art', ongoing, Tate Gallery, Liverpool.

Working with Modern British Art. Tate Collection at Tate Liverpool: A Guide for Teachers, £14.95.

Victor Pasmore 1908–1998, catalogue for the memorial retrospective at Marlborough Fine Art, London, £10.

Victor Pasmore, *Burning Waters* (second version), visual and poetic images (drawings and poems) by Victor Pasmore, Enitharmon Press and Marlborough Graphics, Limited Edition 300 copies, 1995, £30.

Gilbert & George at Milton Keynes

Stephen Snoddy

Why exhibit in Milton Keynes?, you might ask, which is precisely what happened at a press launch for the exhibition on the construction site of the new Milton Keynes Gallery this June. Reinforcing their familiar philosophy of Art for All, Gilbert & George promptly replied:

> We are thrilled to have this opportunity to exhibit our new pictures in this exquisite new gallery in Milton Keynes. The mere mention of the name Milton Keynes brings a smile of enthusiasm to the faces of our younger friends. It is very important that this young 'space station' of a city now has a building devoted to contemporary culture. We are sure that it will be an exciting experience for everyone.

And when asked about the content and meaning of the new works they said:

> They deal with the thoughts and feelings that lie within us all and with the issues that confront us daily. Our cities, your tears, their money, the rain, our sexuality, your sweat, their views are all in 'The Rudimentary Pictures'.

That this brand new contemporary art gallery should open with Gilbert & George represents an unexpected but fitting pairing.

Milton Keynes is the antithesis of an English City. It is the product of planning, a most un-British activity, as cities in the British mind grow organically, from the heart and not the head. Milton Keynes is not a quaint history lesson; it is not for the romantic who dwells on the past, but for the rational and forward-looking, who will admire its logic and its order. Like Gilbert & George, it is bold, new, universal, contentious, progressive and democratic. The grids so omnipresent in Gilbert & George's images are perfectly in tune with the look of Milton Keynes, and oddly enough there happens to be a symbiotic relationship between the life and times of this town and the career of Gilbert & George. The original blueprint and concept of Milton Keynes (drawn up in 1967, the same year Gilbert & George met at St Martin's School of Art) was for a town where the disadvantaged of London's East End could make a fresh start.

In his catalogue essay for the MK G show Michael Bracewell says,

> With their 'Rudimentary Pictures', Gilbert & George have entered into their fourth decade of working together as one artist. They have become, as a consequence of their very isolation and single-mindedness, an international institution within contemporary culture. Similarly, their significance in popular culture is as extensive as their reputation as visual artists. They destroyed the spurious boundaries between High and Low culture, long before such distinctions were even being recognised. They are probably the only people ever to become great pop stars without having recorded a single tune. And to the common charge that 'their work is hard to look at' they reply that 'it's even harder to create'. Above all, they want their art to be accessible to everyone, because they believe that their pictures are about everyone. But the end comes first: what will survive of them is Love.

The formal order found in Milton Keynes and in the art of Gilbert & George reflect a genuine, sought for, original and profound view of life. While Milton Keynes at the end of the twentieth century strives for utopian ideals, and Gilbert & George work towards definitive statements in their pictures, the new millennium is only months away. Though the date itself is just a point on the clock, the life in which both town and art have their extended being continues as one stream. As the exhibition's catalogue suggests, 'the stream of life will continue'. The bold colour of *Eye Wall* suggests the vigour of this life as well as the optimism of the present moment.

We're listening to ordinary life

Gilbert & George chose the following text as a post-script:

Wolf Jahn What interests you more: what comes out of people, or what you put in?
Gilbert What we put in.
George Because that's under our control.
Gilbert That's the most interesting thing, because it's the search for a morality for ourselves.
George The artist's path is a lonely one, but we travel it with the viewer. It's an exploration together. We're going through the jungle on a safari, with a growing band of people behind us.
Gilbert We're listening to the people, our Bangladeshi neighbours, we're listening to what they have to say.
George More than to anybody we know.
Gilbert We're not listening to any art person, not for one second. We're listening to ordinary life.
George We don't feel we have a problem with the vast general public and our pictures. We think we go very well together.*

* Extract from Wolf Jahn interview with Gilbert & George – 7.4.97

Milton Keynes Gallery is part of a purpose-built £30 million arts complex opening in the city centre, providing a major venue for temporary exhibitions in the region. MK G with its 300 square metres of exhibition space arranged in three galleries will hold eight to ten exhibitions each year, ranging from modern and contemporary art to aspects of design, architecture and popular culture. A full education programme will support MK G's exhibitions with a wide range of events offered to people of all ages.

'Gilbert & George: The Rudimentary Pictures', 8 October–9 January 2000, Milton Keynes Gallery. Admission free. Catalogue with texts by David Sylveste Michael Bracewell and Stephen Snoddy, £14.95.

Gilbert and George, *Eye Wall*, 1998, 226 × 190 cm

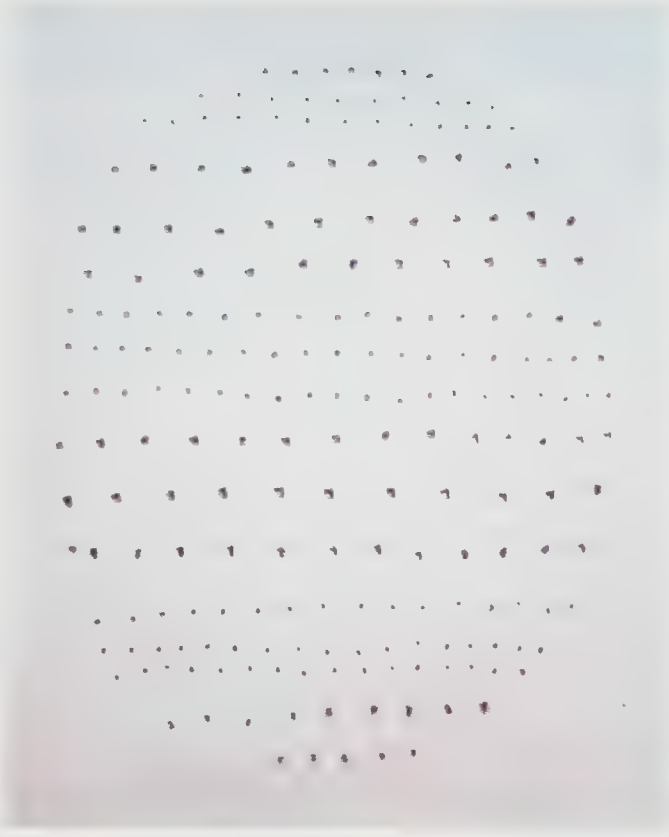
Curating Fontana

Sarah Whitfield

Lucio Fontana is an artist whom other sculptors and painters tend to put very high in their individual pantheons. But how many of us can claim that we are really familiar with the work? Every museum of modern art has its token Fontana (usually a slashed canvas) but there is not a single public collection in Europe or America that begins to do him justice. He therefore joins the band of famous artists whose reputations depend heavily on exhibitions (Bonnard is another). The last time Fontana was properly seen in this country was in 1988 when, thanks to Nicholas Serota, part of the stunning exhibition Bernard Blistène organised for the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris travelled to the Whitechapel Art Gallery. That was a very comprehensive selection, which, even if one wanted to, would now be extremely difficult to repeat.

Museums and collectors are more aware of the immense fragility of these works than they were ten years ago, with good reason. One very fine large canvas with a single cut belonging to a major European museum was damaged not so long ago because a member of the public spotted a tiny thread of canvas hanging from the inside of the cut and decided to pull on it. That painting is probably now beyond repair. In the conservation department of another museum I saw one of Fontana's '*buchi*' (the canvases with holes) which, after someone had stuck a pencil through it, had one hole too many. Vandalism is a hazard, but there are less deliberate forms of damage that can just as easily reduce a masterpiece to a shadow of its former glory. The minimalism of Fontana's late work makes his canvases as vulnerable as Barnett Newman's or Mark Rothko's or Brice Marden's – one scuff, one print of a grubby hand, and the whole surface suffers. Needless to say, Fontana's use of the Stanley knife and the awl brings its own problems. Any trace of slackness in a cut and the tension that holds the work together is completely lost. A marvellous oil of the mid-1960s, one of the greatest of all the series of gouged canvases that play on the image of female genitalia, cannot be moved, as the single elongated hole, suggestive of both a crucifixion and a vulva, is quite literally hanging together by a thread.

Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept/Expectation ('The Teresita')*, 1965, water-based paint on canvas and lacquered wood, 200 · 150 cm. Marinotti Estate. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan



Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept*, 1966, oil on canvas, 113 × 94 cm. Collection Penny and David McCall, New York. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

Condition, then, has been a major consideration in determining the selection for the Hayward Gallery's forthcoming show. And so it was all the more cheering – and surprising – to be able to assemble over 35 early sculptures made in that most fragile of materials, baked clay. During Fontana's lifetime, and even afterwards, these works in painted terracotta and polychrome ceramic were regarded as curiosities rather than an essential part of his creative process. Yet, apart from their extraordinary originality and bizarre beauty, they provide essential information about the late works on canvas. The holes, the cuts, the blasted, gouged and wounded surfaces are solidly grounded in the traditions of modelling and carving. The early sculpture is essential in that it shows that Fontana's career as a sculptor is all of a piece. Even though he liked to cast himself as an artist who belonged entirely to the post-war era, his roots go back to the 1930s as surely as Giacometti's or Henry Moore's.

During the past twelve months, one issue above all has dominated our curatorial discussions. What should we do about Fontana's environmental pieces, the so-called '*ambiente*'? Often constructed at the last minute for exhibitions and trade fairs, these installations and neon sculptures represented some of the most daring and idiosyncratic of all Fontana's works. But virtually all of them were destroyed or dismantled within weeks of being made. Fontana was happy in his belief that 'art was not made for eternity', but critics and curators like art to be permanent and over the years there have been many attempts, some horrendous, some just unsuccessful, to reconstruct these ephemeral works of art. Yet they represent a side of Fontana's 'spatialist' vision that cannot be ignored. Finally, spurred on by the architect Claudio Silvestrin, the designer of the exhibition and a passionate advocate of Fontana's work, we decided to go ahead and reconstruct one of the last of the '*ambiente*', the white labyrinth he designed for 'Documenta 4' in 1968. Not only is this a wonderfully dramatic space, but it is one that it is possible to replicate faithfully. Conceptually too, it makes sense in the context of this selection. Its overwhelming whiteness is a tribute to the spectacular Hall of Honour, an all-white space designed by the architects Palanti and Persico in collaboration with Fontana for the Milan Triennale of 1936. That was Fontana's starting point, and by including his homage to the visionary architects of his youth, the exhibition comes full circle.

'Lucio Fontana', 14 October–9 January 2000, Hayward Gallery, London. Catalogue, with essay by Sarah Whitfield, Hayward Gallery.

Verner Panton

Jonathan R Jones

Modernist design has undergone something of a renaissance in recent years. Exhibitions such as 'The Work of Charles and Ray Eames', 'Modern Britain: 1929–1939' and now 'Verner Panton: Light and Colour', all at the Design Museum, London, have fuelled interest in the decorative arts of the recent past. Contemporary interior design is infused with retro tendencies and this October Habitat is launching its '20th Century Legends' series, which reproduces a selection of iconic designs of previous decades, including those of Verner Panton. As the century draws to a close, nostalgia for the 'authenticity' of these 'classic' designs provides a much-needed feeling of continuity with the past.

Verner Panton (1926–1998) was Denmark's most uncompromising designer. The undulating black walls of the exhibition lead the viewer through a broadly chronological presentation of Panton's career, from his early years as an assistant in the drawing office of Arne Jacobsen to his dizzying light sculptures and vibrant fabrics of the 1970s. The installation has the feel of a design showcase of the sort which helped to create the image of Verner Panton as the *enfant terrible* of Danish design. However, considering Panton's concern for creating a 'total environment', it seems a strange decision to separate the elements of his interior design into displays of seating, lighting and textiles. His iconic *Panton Chair*, made from a single piece of moulded plastic, is displayed on a plinth with the kind of reverence which might usually be reserved for fine art.

This exhibition suffers from the perennial difficulty of exhibiting design in a meaningful way. Rugs are meant to be walked over, not displayed like wall hangings; chairs are meant to be sat upon, not displayed in black, back-lit niches like works of art or objects of veneration. While no one would deny the artistry of Panton's furniture designs, removing them from their intended environment divorces them from their function and meaning as objects. Equally, they are severed from the cultural climate in which they were produced. His textile designs would have been impossible without the innovations of Op Art, and his psychedelic imagery clearly owes much to the hallucinogenic drug culture of the 1960s and '70s. Panton was designing in the era of the Vietnam War and the international student revolts of 1967–8. It was a time of new horizons: space exploration and the sexual revolution.

Verner Panton. *Panton Chair*. 1968

Panton's eccentric designs, such as his chairs which hang from the ceiling, or his five-storey sofas, suggest new ways of living. What led designers such as Panton to reconsider interiors in such a revolutionary way? What made them seek to change the ways in which we relate to our built environment, and to what extent were they successful? These are questions which the exhibition prompts yet fails to address. Some of Panton's most ambitious design schemes were for social spaces such as the Varna restaurant in Aarhus, Denmark (1971). However, one wonders how these spaces functioned and how people interacted within them. The promotional films and publicity photographs in the exhibition rarely include figures, and those which do present modish women or spaced-out men who are positioned within the interiors but do not inhabit them.

Panton's works are also detached from their political and economic context. What of the ecological awareness of designers in the 1970s, or the impact of the 1973 Arab oil embargo on the cost of producing materials reliant on petro-chemicals? The production side of the design process is neglected, except for heroic images of the designer-genius at work. We are told of Panton's revolutionary use of new technologies and materials, but nothing of who actually made these objects, how much they cost to produce, and to whom they were available. It is not sufficient to suggest that the enduring popularity of Panton's works is proof of their status as icons of modernist design. If Panton's designs are still popular today, what is it that makes them so?

About half of the exhibition space is given over to a reconstruction of Panton's own installation of his work, designed for Denmark's Trapholt Museum shortly before his death last year. There is an assumption that presenting works in the way in which the designer intended negates the need to assess the validity or usefulness of this presentation. Panton arranged his works in eight interconnecting rooms, each containing furnishings in a single colour. Mirrors are positioned at each end to create the illusion of a never-ending kaleidoscope of light and colour. While the exhibition attempts to link Panton's fascination with colour to the investigations of the Bauhaus masters Kandinsky and Itten, this assertion is not explored in any depth.

'Verner Panton: Light and Colour' is nevertheless a breathtaking exhibition. Panton's vibrant designs are clearly the product of a ceaselessly creative mind and are filled with playfulness and innovation. However, this exhibition falls into the trap of displaying design as art, with little or no explanation of the use of these fantastical objects. Although this view is encouraged by the way in which Panton himself intended his designs to be displayed, it is ultimately a bogus vision. The catalogue reproduces images of the designer's own home, perhaps one of the most complete expressions of his world view. It is a shame that this exhibition could not have provided as complete an expression of Panton's 'total solution for an environment' and located this vision within a broader cultural and social context.

Verner Panton, installation seen from the green room, Design Museum

'Verner Panton: Light and Colour', until 10 October, Design Museum, London. Sponsored by Habitat and Hot Tickets and presented in association with Visiting Arts. Touring dates and venues as yet unconfirmed

Luc Tuymans

Interviewed by Martin Gayford

Martin Gayford You've talked about isolation being important in your development as a painter while you were growing up in Belgium?

Luc Tuymans That goes all the way back to my youth. There was no real doubt about what I wanted to do from early on. But that kind of specific isolation – looking at things, looking at them until they either disappear or come back to me at a later stage – was fairly obsessive. It grew into an obsession with being an image-maker. Why I became a painter specifically, I cannot explain completely, but it was a medium I could do, and could comprehend.

Painting appealed to me, as an individual, because it's an individual matter, an individual statement. In this sense you could say there is some sort of morality involved in being a painter. Not in the sense that the painter is a hero, that's utterly discounted; but there is a very subjective layer which is impossible to avoid. You implant your own physicality onto the imagery. If I were to paint you, your face would be longer. It's unavoidable. I might try to go against that, but still in the end there would be distortion. And in the end, that's what painting is: in a sense it is distortion. So it's as inadequate as any other form of memory. But the strange thing is that it is memorised differently, because it is rendered in paint, and also through a person. For that reason people will always react completely differently to a painting than to a photograph or a film, or any other medium.

MG What kind of work were you producing at the beginning?

LT I started out as a very virtuoso painter; there was a great gestural thing in the work, which I completely broke off at an early stage – as an art student of eighteen or nineteen – in order to reduce the painting until it became a bit more meaningful for me, because also it went against my own expectations, my aesthetics. Of course, in more than 25 years of painting I've now created my own aesthetics, which is a paradox you cannot avoid.

When I was seventeen, I remember I saw a reproduction of an El Greco in a book, and I thought it was completely manneristic, and it didn't appeal to me at all. But at eighteen I was confronted with three portraits of holy men by El Greco in Budapest, and I was just blown out of my socks. He explained to me what a painting should be, in terms of deconstructing space, in terms of making an image which is almost impossible to memorise. It was such a shock that I wanted to quit painting for a while.

MG Why impossible to memorise?

LT For me a good painting is not to be memorised, especially not in terms of size, scale, colour. I also think it should be precise. The importance of a painting, in relation to what's moving, is that it's totally fixed – on a wall. Therefore it should mobilise itself from within, and this can only be done through precision. Even people like Munch, or Pollock, who work with a very decisive gestural image, are still very systematic in the way they use the gesture. The physical act only has meaning for me when it is very precise. What I admire in painting is only precision, not spontaneity. I don't mean that I look at painting as something very classical, just as very precise.

MG You have compared your painting to folk art. Were you deliberately looking for an impersonal way of working, without emotional baggage?

LT That was maybe the process of thought in the beginning, but of course I can't hold that up any more. Through the habit of painting over the years you become a bit dislocated from the initial point of departure. I can't deny that I've actually made painting charming again, to a certain extent, and that there's a certain pleasure in painting which I cannot deny to myself.

But why? – to go back to the folk element I came up with. To give you a comparison. Take the German artist Thomas Schütter, who is a very good friend of mine. When you look at his work, at first blink it looks exceedingly clumsy or very naïve, but when you look further it becomes extremely complex. That's a similarity we have as artists, about which we don't talk, we just know.

MG So your work is the result of suppressing the gestural virtuosity?

LT There's a painting I've done called *The Purge*, which could go in many directions. It could be ethnic cleansing, but it could also be sobering up, it's also losing your body fluids. But it's also about reduction, which painting is in a sense, otherwise it would be entirely invisible.

MG Where do the ideas for your paintings come from?

LT Of course, you always turn towards your own activity, what you want to see, and what you're looking at. But there's always a time lapse in that, which makes the image impossible to understand for me, and when something is inconceivable for me, I find it intriguing. And I will work on it to the point where I can understand it. Then it will be meaningful to make a painting. That's where the paintings come from, rationally speaking.

You can ask yourself whether art could exist without anachronism. It's an interesting point. For me, I think it's important, especially in terms of painting, because painting is something that has its own time scale. You take on a different time scale in order to produce a painting. It can take you months, or years, to come up with some sorts of imagery. But you

Luc Tuymans, *Silent Music*, 1993, oil on canvas, 83 × 70 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

will always be lagging behind your own imagery, otherwise you couldn't make it.
MG You mean, there is always a gap, even between looking and drawing a line.
LT There is a physical as well as a mental gap. Without that it is impossible to come up with images. If you could understand the visual completely, directly and immediately, what would be the point in making images? There would not be any fascination left.

Where the paintings come from visually, that's something else. Visually, an image has to be workable, that's the game. And workable means that intuitively it seems the right thing to do. This is the imagery that is edgy enough for me to accept, or it's the imagery ending. My tendency would be to go for the image that is ending, either coming to the point of dissolving, or the point of reinstating itself.

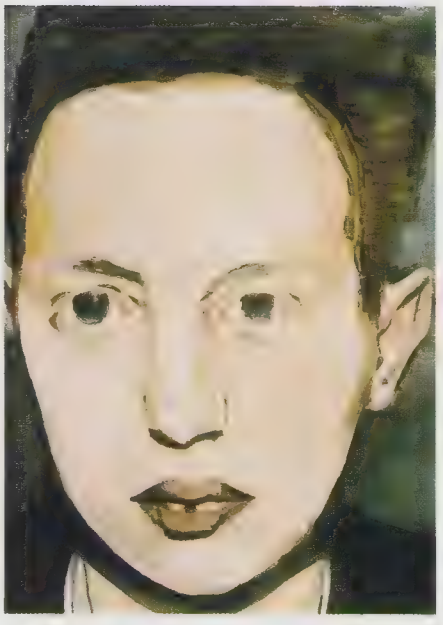
Now, a great deal of my work, most of it, is about derivative imagery – that is, imagery which already exists, and which I have reworked. I have dissected the material. I look at the imagery until it's completely dead, I've analysed it until there's nothing left. Then the painting can begin, when I'm sure there's nothing more to see, there are no more alternatives. That's the cruel act of painting. It's looking at something completely dead. I can talk about it much better than I can paint it.
MG That detachment is important to you, clearly. Is the distance getting greater?
LT Yes, not only because I'm growing older, but also because I have painted 380 paintings. And that's also a reduction, because I've destroyed more than half of my production. And what I am left with is overlapping; not that I've returned to the same imagery, but there is imagery which has a similarity. Which is an intriguing point. In principle nothing has really changed, but of course you change, so my curiosity is to find out what I will paint when I'm sixty, just to find out what the leftovers of the dinner will be for me after 30 or 40 years of painting.

The indifference grows and grows and grows. The indifference which I've worked for so hard, to the point where I was able to make the hardest paintings, such as the Diagnostic Views, which are portraits of sick people. People who had cancer. I portrayed them in such a way that, though working from a photograph, I changed the eyes, so there was no contact between the viewer and the paintings, no empathy. It's the ultimate frontal imagery I've made, all blown back in your face.

I had that idea in '79, but it was impossible to paint it because the reasons for painting it were far too existential then. It took me ten or twelve years before I finally came to the point where I could make those paintings. The distance was there.
MG How did you make *Diagnostic Views*, I mean what was the process?
LT What I did was recrop the photographs, then some of them I made watercolours of, in order to deconstruct them and make them understandable to me. Those are not bigger than the palm of my hand, so I can hold them. That's what mostly happens. I never project an image onto the canvas, because I think that flattens it. So most of the imagery is small, and the enlargement, even to a normal-sized painting, is extreme.
MG Are your sources always photographic?
LT That depends, it runs criss-cross. A great deal of the work can be traced to imagery from photographs, or from a film or a video tape, which I then photographed, or whatever. Or memory images, such as *Silent Music*. Once I made a model of a drum kit, then took a polaroid of it, which is another distortion. Then painted that. Then there are drawings and watercolours. They are all intertwined.

Film has been a very important basic source. It changed my way of cropping the imagery and even thinking about it. It has been the moving image rather than photography that was important. I think that film has a similarity to painting, because both are very illusionistic within time. Of course, the big difference is that painting is always more decontextualised, because film has a narrative. On the other hand, there is also the fact that I come out of a cinema with an obsession with finding one image with which I could summarise all the moving range of imagery. With a painting, I just do it the other way round. There is a linkage.
MG Why is indifference so crucial to you?
LT The indifference as a pose, or as a position that you take, is not an indifference to reality, but an indifference to all the other possible reductions. By depending on reality, you are at least true to a certain deduction from that reality, and don't go into stupid ephemera, or spiritual territory, which are impossible to visualise. Van Gogh really had to kill himself because his aims in painting were impossible to achieve.

Luc Tuymans, *Diagnostic View II*, 1992, oil on canvas, 58.5 × 39 cm. Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. Krefeld



Luc Tuymans, *Diagnostic View V*, 1992, oil on canvas, 58 × 42 cm. Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. Krefeld

But the indifference is more than an arbitrary construction. There is a sovereignty about painting which is difficult to deal with. There's an autonomy within the imagery. You might say there's a very deliberate stubbornness in keeping on painting. There are other ways in which you could get a much more immediate effect. But in painting you upgrade it by physical means, actually physically copying it. You have that obstinate reaction of retracing imagery. But this utter uselessness of the imagery, and of the medium itself, is also completely invaluable.

Nowadays, we are confronted by a highly mediatised world, full of its own contemporariness. So you could ask if there is still a need for a memory. And it's interesting that these days painting is barged out of the main shows. Also taken out of the centre of the art world as a medium. But the more it's on the periphery, the more important to the centre it becomes in different ways. If I see Bill Viola's slow-motion imagery, I can always say that it is pictorial. It *is* pictorial.
MG You mean that in a way painting remains the paradigm?
LT In the sense that it's the first conceptualised imagery. You cannot fight that. I don't think it's interesting to defend painting, or to open up the discourse of whether painting is alive or dead. It's not an interesting discussion. But what is interesting is that whatever medium you discuss, painting as a paradigm and as a conceptualiser of imagery is very deep in our culture. In that sense painting is much more than the medium, and the support and so on, it's a huge concept. You cannot just blank it out. When critics or art historians or curators ask me why I still paint, the answer is that I am not naïve.

'Luc Tuymans: The Purge', 23 October–30 January 2000, Kunstmuseum, Wolffburg, Germany. The artist is represented by White Cube, London.

Double Billing: Colour for Kosovo in London

Karen Wright

Left to right: Anthony Gormley's image coloured by Majlinda Kastrati, aged eleven, Blerton Murati, aged eight, and Mentor Murati, aged nine

A fourteen-year-old Kosovan boy, Driton Shabani, teamed up with British Artist Richard Wentworth this summer to star in a bill-board exhibition in central London. A bizarre conjunction? The occasion was a poster display of drawings by leading British artists, coloured in by refugee Kosovan children and mounted on central sites around the capital. Driton Shabani had approached all the images in the colouring book with a sophistication that belied his young age. His treatment of Richard Wentworth's quite stark 'hinge' was particularly original: the parentheses of bright colour were not all going in the same direction but reversed in on themselves, forming a rhythmic counterpoint of flickering shapes. A project that started on a purely charitable impulse was suddenly transformed into a thrilling artistic event with this collaboration of art and childhood imagination.

The genesis of this project was *Colour*, a children's colouring book distributed in aid of UNICEF. The book featured original line drawings by 27 leading British artists, complete with a set of six coloured pencils. 70,000 copies were distributed free to children in the war zone, and a further 30,000 have been sold in Britain with the aim of raising money for UNICEF's work to get Kosovan children back to school.

Tim Ashton, artistic director at Circus advertising agency, had the idea of using poster sites as public art sites. Mills and Allen, who own many of the poster sites, were convinced it would be a good idea to utilise them in the quiet season for the display of art, and the organisers of Colour for Kosovo were offered twelve prime spaces free of charge. Mills and Allen also absorbed all printing and postage costs. It is surprising and moving how from the beginning of the project so many people have been inspired to generosity. (To the readers of this magazine thanks are also due for their interest and support.)

The bill-board images were selected from a group of books coloured-in by the refugee children and returned by special request. As it happened, the colouring books had arrived in Macedonia the very day that the peace accord was signed, so the children were all on the move back to their homes in Kosovo. Luckily 30 families were persuaded to delay their departure briefly for a colouring party – for which the children received as a bribe a precious packet of sweets and a second book, because they were reluctant to give up their treasured books. In the midst of all that chaos and exodus, these children focused on the playful task in hand with amazing concentration and enthusiasm. The rest of the 70,000 books will be given out through the schools in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia.

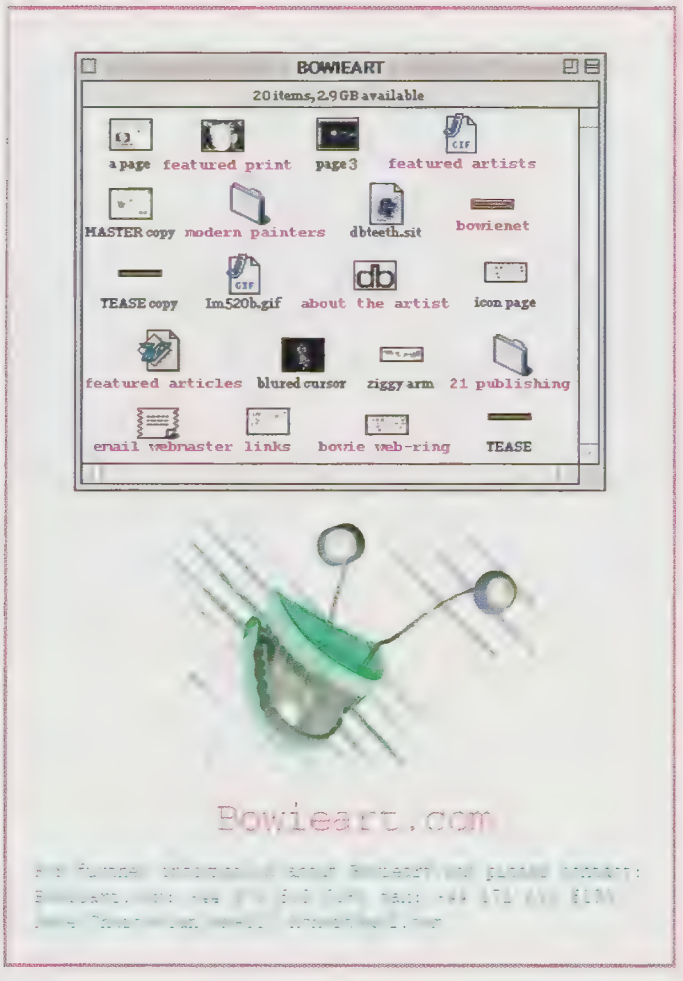
Even the variety in the artists' drawings had not really prepared us for the quality of the children's pictures. Images were re-interpreted by tiny details. Chris Ofili's lady could look benign, flirtatious, coy, evil, seductive or funny, depending on the imaginative or emotional response of a particular child. She had rings on her fingers and high-glossed nail polish; her hair was every colour of the rainbow, and in one notable example her coif was indeed a rainbow of different hues. Anthony Gormley's splintered man was meticulously/splodgily/tonally worked over. He became a menacing savage or a corporate man with tie and colour-coordinated suit...

Doing a public art project requires the cooperation of the creators. What had been notable about 'Colour' was the enthusiasm of everyone involved in it. This meant that artists were willing to share equal billing with unknown children, and even notoriously difficult copyright issues were swept away in the general enthusiasm. Some of the artists also admitted the difficulty of producing drawings on demand. Tracey Emin confessed in her recent interview with *The Big Issue* that 'it took me about 25 drawings. Everything I did was unacceptable. I wanted it to be sweet'. She can rest assured in her partnership with twelve-year-old Albana Dedushi who has sweetly coloured in her birds alternately red and blue as they chirpily converse with each other.

Touring the sites in a double-decker bus, it was amusing to watch people walking by the posters look up and sometimes do a visible double-take: Gilbert & George don't get to lord it over South Kensington tube station often, especially embellished with the green eye-shadow that Sabille Softolli had applied to their image. I hope there will be some way to tell the children that their images brightened up the end of a sultry London summer, dispelling some of the commuters' *ennui*. Meanwhile, perhaps some children in the Balkans are picking up on the best in British art – and making more of their own.

A message from the child artists of Kosovo. Photo: Daphne Astor

Donations, please, to UNICEF, Colour, Freepost, Chelmsford CM2 8BR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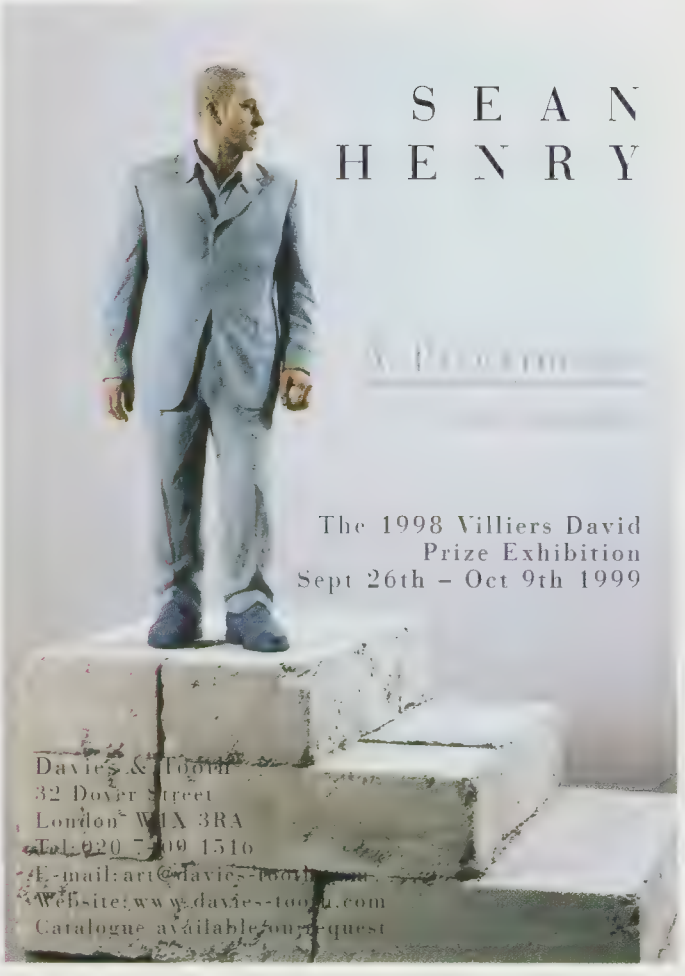
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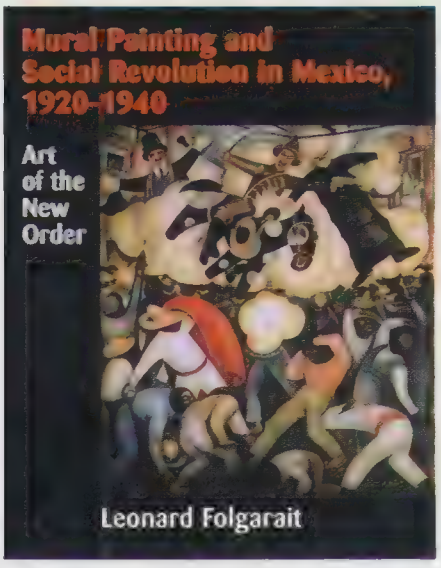
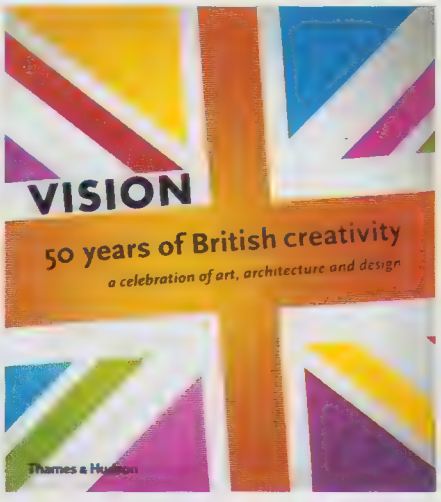
Bookmark

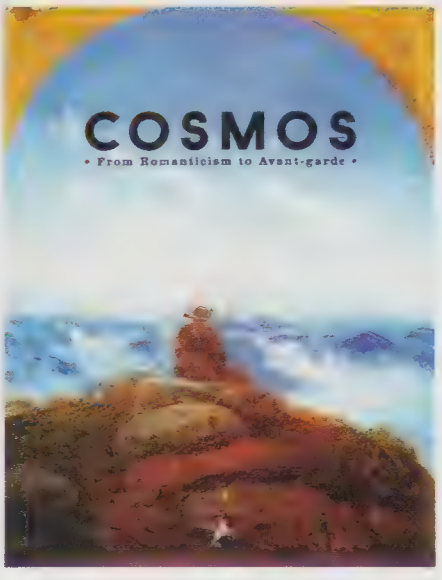
by Karen Wright



Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico 1920–1940 by Leonard Folgarait, Cambridge University Press, £50. This is the first book to focus on the Mexican mural painters in depth. Diego Rivera, Jose Orozco and David Siqueiros were unique and political visionaries. How they interacted with their patrons, and how far were they pushed into the cold by US government money promoting the Abstract Expressionists, all this makes for a fascinating read.

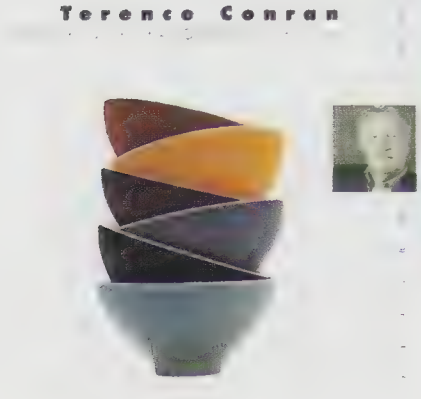


Vision: 50 years of British creativity, Thames and Hudson, £16.95. This bargain-priced book celebrates a half century of Thames and Hudson's art publishing. It is suitably handsome, with contributions by well-known culture vultures Melvin Bragg, David Sylvester, Nicholas Serota, David Hockney, *et al*. Browsing through this retrospective of British culture should give a *fin de siècle* depressive quite a lift. I didn't know that even our colourful I-mac computers have an English forefather – designer Jonathan Ive.

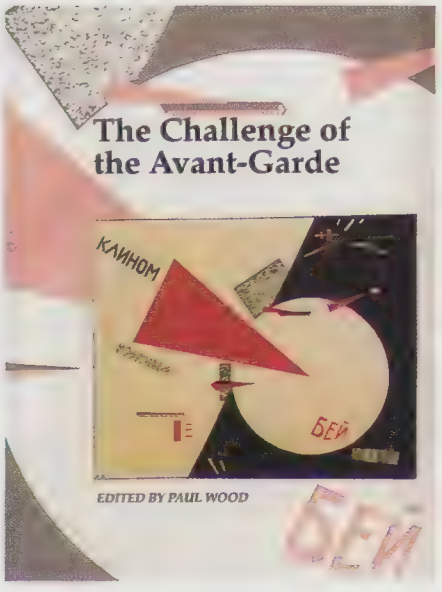


Cosmos: From Romanticism to Avant-garde, edited by Jean Clair, published by Prestel, £45. This elegant tome examines the relationship between the world of science and art: how does man's exploration of the moon, for example, influence artistic endeavour? I had never really thought about Malevich as a proponent of the theory of gravity – an interesting take on his levitating geometry!

Mariele Neudecker, published by *firstsite*, Colchester, £16.95. This is a slim book with a cool touch of the lavish – silver type on the cover against a haunting green Alp-scape, one of this German artist's drowned fibre-glass mirages of icy peaks, which inhabit glass tanks like specimens from another world. Romanticism and the sublime seem to be making a come-back as the Millennium approaches. *Modern Painters* designer Herman Lelie's cool treatment beautifully compliments Neudecker's chilly visions.



Terence Conran: Design and the Quality of Life by Elizabeth Wilhide, Thames and Hudson, £9.95. No one else has had such a profound influence on how we trendies eat out in the '90s. We may wonder whether this is a good thing as we shout to be heard in the Conraniverous glass spaces, but this small volume will make some of us feel even more dissatisfied with our domestic clutter.



The Challenge of the Avant-garde edited by Paul Wood, Yale University Press, £30 hb, £16.95 pb. This is the fourth in a series of six, which form the basis of an Open University course. All these volumes are useful reference books – well illustrated and thought out: this one looks at a particularly interesting period of history across surprising international borders.

Books

More Than One Class of Value

Dore Ashton

David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period*, Cambridge, 1999, £40.

Toward the finale of David Craven's book he offers excerpts from his extensive interviews with Meyer Schapiro, whom he has wisely chosen as one of his principal cicerones through the thickets of social history. Craven remarks that in Schapiro's writings 'there is a conception of historical meaning as something that emerges from a dynamic interplay of subjectivity and objectivity', with 'neither one being the determinant of truth value'. Schapiro responds with one of his mini-lectures that used to astound us all. You could telephone Meyer with a simple query and come away, sometimes an hour later, marvelling at his ability to improvise a fully developed discourse, often having nothing to do with what you asked, but always leaving you with a feeling that you had learned something important. Schapiro's response to Craven:

> What is a fact? According to most languages it is a product of labor. Consider the word for fact in German, *Tatsache* – which means 'thing done' – in French *fait* – which means 'made' – or even the Latin base for the English word 'fact' – which is the word *factum* and is related to 'manufacture' which means 'made by hand'. What is the truth? The truth is what is *made*. There is an important letter in this regard by the scientist Galileo to the painter Cigoli, in which Galileo spoke of the truth as a synthesis of the technique of the artisan plus the knowledge of the artist.

The problem with social histories of art is that the only incontrovertible 'facts' are the works of art, and all the rest depends on who is 'making' the truths. Craven is a natural sympathiser with those who, during the so-called McCarthy period (which, as one of McCarthy's victims, Cedric Belfrage, pointed out, ought to be called the Nixon period), openly, and from a more or less socialist position, registered their dissent. His book focuses on the Abstract Expressionists who were natural dissenters and not silent collaborators with United States political policies, as many careless commentators have tried to assert. In a way, the book is a prolonged riposte to those misguided critics, and above all to Serge Guilbaut who, in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art From Paris*, uses a guilt-by-association technique to indict the Abstract Expressionists. Craven carefully argues that many well-meaning critiques of cold war policies drag in the artists as accomplices where, in fact, the artists in question could all be seen as he sees them: as lifelong dissenters. In marshalling his evidence, Craven collects many previously ignored 'facts' from secret files, and many proofs that almost all the artists lumped together in the category Abstract Expressionism steadfastly held on to their principles. As de Kooning said: 'These artists do not want to conform'.

Unlike so many writers on the left, Craven never arrogates to himself the right to judge. He does not condemn artists whose works were used by the American government – as they undeniably were – for propaganda purposes. On the contrary, he has carefully researched the civil histories of each artist and reminds his readers of their frequent public disavowals of such outrages as the war in Vietnam, the intervention of the military in Central America, and the oppression of the blacks in the United States. Certain artists, such as Motherwell, Rothko, Newman, Reinhardt and Gottlieb, had political convictions they freely expressed – so freely that they earned prolonged surveillance by various secret agencies of the United States Government. We learn, for instance, that Mark Rothko, whose anti-imperialist sentiments never changed, had a sizeable FBI file, and that (to my own stupefaction) in it was material provided by the Head of the Counter-Intelligence Branch of the US Marine Corps. The US Marine Corps?

The list of things to which the New York artists did not wish to conform is so extensive that Craven, in what he calls his dialogical approach, can hardly contain them in the format of this book. He sees Abstract Expressionism as 'a visual language fundamentally at odds with the homogenized Anglo-American culture of the McCarthyists and in opposition to the largely Eurocentric pedigree whereby cold-war liberals valorised "major" art, both in and out of the art world'. Once stated, Craven's position can easily be attacked, and probably will be, by critics who refuse to see in the works themselves evidence of artistic opposition. And they would have a point. There is no way the invisible strands of cultural influences can be induced to reveal themselves unequivocally within a painting – always the problem in cultural critiques. But as testimony to artists' beliefs, or perhaps I should say disbeliefs, Craven's work is invaluable. These artists can be seen as intellectuals contributing to the making of intellectual history. He frequently cites Robert Motherwell, indisputably an intellectual of eloquence, who, in 1949, declared that it was 'easier to say some of the things the School of New York is not', going on to discuss a number of 'prevailing ideologies' that he and his

Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic LXX*, c.1961, oil on canvas, 175.3 · 289.6 cm

Meyer Schapiro, *Portrait of Irving Howe*, 1970, pen and ink on paper, 210 × 164 × 87.5 cm

friends rejected.

Among the myths and ideas they consistently resisted was that of an art that was somehow peculiarly American (including Clement Greenberg's astonishing claims for an American-type painting). The artists for whom Motherwell spoke convincingly were fundamentally, and intelligently, internationalist in outlook as were the critics attentive to their thoughts. Harold Rosenberg, who, along with Schapiro, Irving Howe and the older John Dewey, are Craven's well-selected beacons, more or less summed up the artists' views when he wrote in 1964:

> Internationalism in art of the early twentieth-century type has been dead for thirty years, since the decline of Surrealism... The earlier internationalism has been superseded by a global art whose essence is precisely the absence of qualities attached to any geographical center. In the present globalism, there is no opening for a 'new Paris'...

This was Rosenberg's answer to the hidden cultural imperialism the government exercised by assuming that the entire world looked to the United States for guidance – an assumption that in its real political consequences has proved catastrophic. (Years before, Barnett Newman, an anarchist believer, had written that art glorifying American life resembled 'fascist ideology' by using 'intensified nationalism, false patriotism, the appeal to race, the re-emphasis of home and homey sentiments' – all tendencies still apparent in the US.)

Craven, who has always been attentive to the primary victims of the United States – those other millions of Americans in the Western hemisphere – uses his knowledge of Latin America to advance his thesis that Abstract Expressionism must be read in a multivalent way, or as he puts it, a 'decentered' fashion. In his discussion of the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Latin America, Craven notes that 'artists, intellectuals, and popular movements of Latin America often assigned a very different, even "insurrectionary" meaning to Abstract Expressionism that caused the art to be recruited as an "anti-imperialist" force in the 1950s and 1960s'. He cites the neglected and important writings of two Latin American critics, Marta Traba and Juan Acha, both of whom drew upon larger, and largely socialist, cultural theories which they enlisted to explain how the artists they knew interpreted the works they had seen when North America began exporting its triumphal notion of Abstract Expressionism. It turns out that these American critics from the other Americas had views that pretty nearly always dovetailed with the views of the dissenters of the North, which is why so many Abstract Expressionists, when the occasion required, could be enlisted against government policy that led to military intervention in Latin America. No matter how rudimentary their understanding was, most artists both north and south, understood that corporate capitalism was the enemy not only for so-called third-world countries, but for their own project.

It is not surprising that all of the artists associated with the School of New York were exceedingly uneasy about the cold war, the Americanisation of the world and, above all, the existence of atomic and nuclear bombs. As archives of interviews, letters and public statements previously overlooked definitively indicate, they generally agreed with Rosenberg who pointed out in 1962 that the cold war was a 'delusionary struggle between real interests':

> The West wants freedom to the extent that freedom is compatible with private ownership and with profits; the Soviets want socialism to the extent that socialism is compatible with the dictatorship of the Communist bureaucracy... Today the menace is nuclear war. To abate this menace, a realistic politics would get rid once and for all of the fraud of freedom versus socialism.

Not only has Craven peppered his account with statements by artists revealing their fundamental pessimism and exasperation, but he has chosen quotations that show how often the artists got it right, as recent political events have shown. They probably never read Walter Benjamin, but they knew in their bones the truth of his 1936 statement: 'The technological formula may be stated as follows: only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system'. There was almost never a serious assessment of the work of the major Abstract Expressionists without some allusion to their emotional responses to the militaristic atrocities of the century. The painter and writer, Elaine de Kooning, in writing of Jackson Pollock, quotes the poet Frank O'Hara:

> This new painting does have qualities of passion and lyrical desperation, unmasked and uninhibited, not found in other recorded eras; it is not surprising that faced with universal destruction, as we are told, our art should at last speak with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty to a future which may well be non-existent, in a last effort of recognition which is the justification of being.

It was not only war that artists perceived as the disastrous effluvium of technology. They were keenly aware of the real meaning of American adulation of technology. Craven poses the question early in his book when he discusses the activities of the Frankfurt School while in exile in the United States, and their concourse with Meyer Schapiro:

> Both Schapiro's position and that of the Frankfurt School presupposed, then, a deep and very early grasp of how the homogenizing logic of the 'culture industry' (to use a concept coined by Adorno and Horkheimer) was motivated by the fact that, within corporate capitalism, mass production necessitates the production of masses.

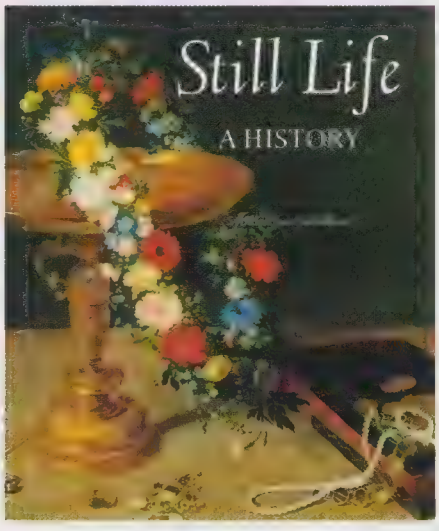
Technology produces what is called the culture industry that Craven clearly sees to be as insidious today as it was when these artists were obliquely protesting its products. While Newman early recognises the bluff of 'homey' values, Gottlieb would remark 30 years later, in 1973, that 'the great quantitative audience is for Hollywood and Walt Disney and I think that's the future of art – in that direction. More and more people will get their kicks from Disneyland'. As we used to say, you can say *that* again! Not only has the Disney corporation conquered the world with its theme parks, but it has even gone into the nostalgia industry, creating 'homey' fake towns – horrible caricatures of the '*communitas*' advocated by Paul Goodman and his anarchist-leaning artist friends.

If Schapiro was right in saying that the truth is what is made, then Craven has made a good stand here for his conviction that Abstract Expressionism should be seen as an 'uneasy locus' of many values – something Motherwell had understood when he declared that 'works of art are by nature pluralistic: they contain more than one class of values'. He eludes the trap of cause-and-effect historicism by adopting his flexible 'dialogical' approach. More importantly, Craven has, like the scholar Michael Corris in his study of Ad Reinhardt's complicated history as both a civic and aesthetic man of principle, based his argument on meticulous research. Craven's book, although written rather stiffly, and sometimes marred by the use of scholarly jargon, is brimming with arrows pointing to excellent sources, and will be useful to anyone interested in cultural history – that is to say, dispassionately interested.

Sumptuous but Dull

Norbert Lynton

Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Still Life – A History*, Abrams, £79.95.



This is a sumptuous book on a splendid subject – popular as well as profound – that has never had the attention it deserves. To be more exact, *almost* a sumptuous book. It's big: 420 pages with text and 278 colour 'figures' (not 'plates' on this occasion), most of them good, and another 60 in black and white, all close to where you need them, and most of them with extended captions to serve the browser. Several of the colour illustrations turn out to be slight enlargements of parts of the complete pictures printed close by. The design is bearably dull. None the less, this is quite a visual feast.

Dr Ebert-Schifferer, after teaching art history at universities and climbing the German museum ladder, is now Director General of the Dresden art collections. She evidently knows her stuff and takes us through the history of still life *painting* from ancient times to Baselitz and Gerhard Richter in the 1980s, treating some periods more cursorily than others. But then this is a large subject, more complicated and ill-defined than one might think, even when, as here, it is limited almost entirely to western European (Italy, Spain, France, Germany and the Low Countries) and American painting. The Greeks and Romans did not distinguish between still life and images of 'barbershops and shoemakers' stalls, donkeys, vegetables and such' (Pliny), and called such a painter *rhyparographos*, dirt painter. Images of food they called, more prettily, *xenia*, which hints at 'strangers', as in xenophobia, and meant food and other things offered by way of hospitality.

The terms don't fit well, neither do they help us much with the history of 'modern' still life painting which starts around 1600. There we have the pull between *'still leven'*, the Dutch expression implying inert objects represented from life, and *'nature morte'*, which suggests natural things removed from life: cut flowers (Nolde's garden is allowed in, but not Monet's), picked fruit, dead meat and fish, etc. Other languages adopt one or the other, replacing more specific terms such as 'kitchen scenes', 'banquets', 'flowerpieces' and even 'breakfasts'. The vessels, utensils and cloths that get so much attention could, like the choice of food and flowers, indicate degrees of luxury, but were they substitutes, like pin-ups, or did they go with a luxurious lifestyle? Top aristos commissioned pictures of their collections of curiosities, natural and unnatural; are these still lifes? It is all as confusing as you care to make it, and in this book it stays that way for lack of cultural context.

This matters if you want to know what meaning or function these elaborately worked paintings had apart from just representing things. From the start there was of course the game of *trompe l'oeil*, Parrhasios and Zeuxis around 400 BCE (new p.c. style) outdoing each other in skilful imitation. After 1600 CE the still life carries loads of symbolism, until the nineteenth century shrugs it off and, we are told, perception and notation become the painter's only concern. Cézanne's still lifes are 'purely formal, aesthetic constructs'; 'it thus became possible to re-create nature interpretively instead of merely providing a mimetic reproduction of it'. So much for Chardin, Goya, Delacroix and Courbet, though Courbet's dying trout is described as 'an existential statement' and Goya's *Slices of Salmon* as 'a sympathetic indictment', of human slaughter – I think.

Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Nautilus Cup*, 1662, oil on canvas 79.4 × 67.3 cm. Madrid Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Am I suggesting that this is a tiresome book? It is. The treatment of Cubism, Futurism and Surrealism is slight beyond belief. Chagall, connected to all of these, is in the index but nowhere else; Magritte is mentioned but not illustrated; Dali is not even mentioned; sculpture is shunned except for two Picasso constructions, and thus there is no 'Surrealist object'. Translation may have made it all worse. Some of the extended captions disagree with the main text; one wonders who wrote them. As rendered here, they can also disagree with the illustrations. These, cursory in the twentieth-century section anyway, often fail to supply what the author wants to show or we might want to know about. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* are neither mentioned nor shown; his symbolic chairs are mentioned but not reproduced. The major Russian modernists, mentioned as post-Cubists, don't appear. The American *trompe l'oeil* tradition is well represented, but Stuart Davies is ignored, for subverting it perhaps. Americans reappear with Johns and Rauschenberg but not Guston. All of British painting is represented by one late Hockney. The index is shamefully bad.

This kind of book blocks the production of better books. It almost persuades us that still life, fun to look at, has to be a boring, enclosed subject. No thought is given to still life's place among other genres. Is it a *form* of picture, with implicit formats, tasks and limitations, in the sense that the nude is? Is it not worth discussing, the way nineteenth-century innovators used still life and landscape and raised these to history-painting status? At the start we are told that 'the only style the still life cannot accommodate is pure abstraction'. The point might still have been made that abstract painting has at times employed the form of still life, just as it has the form of landscape or portrait. □

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Slices of Salmon*, *c.*1808–12, oil on canvas, 45 × 62 cm

Letters

All hail Modern Painters!

Things are happening – some? all? as a consequence of you publishing my article on Elizabeth Durack/Eddie Burrup:
– The Robert Hughes research team has knocked on the Durack Gallery door in Broome.
– The paintings that were removed from gallery walls are now invited to be part of a symposium on Aboriginal aesthetic influence on European art traditions in Australia. Said forum to be part of Adelaide Festival, next March.
– The Australian Broadcasting Commission contacted me and I spent a gruelling hour giving a half-hour interview to the nation on my take on the subject.
– Rebecca Hossack is considering an exhibition for next year in London.

Rosalin Sadler
Melbourne

Narrow-minded?

David Lister in his article 'Planet Art' is right to point out Matthew Collings's qualities: the engaging chatty style, the infectious enthusiasm and the sense of contemporaneity. But he says less about Collings's attitudes and judgements on art: is he a real radical who believes in continuous revolution – art can only be kept alive by constantly challenging, changing and taking risks? Is this necessary for art's sake, or the result of developments within the art scene or society? He is suspicious of any general theories as to what defines worth, but continually makes qualitative judgements. That's fine and not inconsistent, but when ideas and comments pile up fast, as in 'Diary', it can become confusing. It's part of the style and there are marvellous insights which you would never get in better-behaved criticism, but it can be a relief when he takes time to describe the inter-connection between form and content/idea, as in his descriptions of Polke's work.

Why not celebrate more often the consistent imaginative intelligence that you find in artists like, for example, Tony Cragg? Immersed in Collingsland, I sometimes get a sense of claustrophobia, living so completely inside the artworld where jokes are self-contained and there is little reference to the outside existence of society, politics, etc. There is a kind of avant-garde exclusivity, surviving into our post avant-garde age. Conventional art is largely ignored; an artist like Andy Goldsworthy is probably suspect because he is popular, and Balthus is beyond the pale because he is in love, not with little girls, but with Trecento Siennese painting. Nevertheless 'Diary' is cultural travelling with a thoughtful and amusing guide, and I'll sign up for the next tour.

Martin Eldridge
Shrewsbury

Long distance reader

I have wanted to write to *Modern Painters* since I first 'discovered' the magazine (in some airport bookshop on my way back to Canada after living in Greece) – unfortunately it was the Summer 1990 memorial issue to Peter Fuller. It was not on sale in Ottawa then and I extolled its virtues to all and have been a steady reader ever since. Now my local newsagent (an art collector) carries the magazine and agrees it's the best on the market – he's a francophone at that, so this is great praise!

I can't resist commenting on a letter from R M in Lyme Regis, – in the Winter '98 issue: I, too, found the Mueck cover unpleasant and folded it in to avoid meeting the eye of the mask – the artist must be pleased by these reactions. Mind you, I don't find it so bad now. I don't agree that the covers are mostly unattractive – they're mostly good, although I do recall an unpleasant Gillian Wearing one, and I've never liked Gilbert & George – how philistine or politically incorrect can one get!

One of my favourite covers was the Bonnard for Summer '98 – simple, and lettering colour worked well. The Schnabel cover is pretty effective too. I certainly disagreed with the criticisms of the article – Bowie's tone goes beautifully with the nature of Schnabel's work and personality; the answers made sense to me and seemed curiously honest. His work wouldn't bear a 'thoughtful analysis' approach as in the Morandi piece suggested by a reader. I found the Schnabel portraits intriguing – it may mean that pretty (with an edge to it of course) is coming back in.

When I was in the UK in May, I saw the Monet and Ingres (not Pollock, having been subjected to too many and too much hype. Our own Riopelle is a far better painter – perhaps too controlled but bears repeated viewing well). Blake Gopnik (*Toronto Globe & Mail*), brother of Adam at the *New Yorker*, pithily titled his review 'Pretty, pretty Pollock', which went straight to my heart!

The Royal Academy certainly managed to put on another 'big top' event – my most piquant overheard remark was in front of one of Monet's Thames paintings: 'it certainly doesn't do it justice, does it?'

I had intended to write to you after the death of Victor Pasmore. I was in the enviable position of being his only student when he offered a painting class for a term at the Central School such a long time ago. He was a very kind and encouraging man and I wish I could have done him more credit. I painted myself into a dead end by trying to follow his advice in doing 'something simple', but after many years away I'm back at it...

In the Spring issue, I particularly liked the interview with Paolozzi – his generous thinking inspired me to respond immediately to a student in a country school who is doing a 'project' on me for his art class, and fill in a questionnaire from Sophia, Bulgaria re intaglio printmakers...

I must add that I enjoy everything by Jed Perl, and others of course, and will now get on with reading this issue of *Modern Painters* – it's just the thing to put off the awful procedure of trying to do a good painting or even a mediocre one!

Louise Cass
Ottawa
www.magma.ca/~1cass

Louise Cass, *3 Nostalgias*, 86.5 × 146.5 cm

Visual thought

Paul Bonaventura challenged art students to become as effective as young physicists or medics. Let us be clear ... scientists, if they want acknowledgement for their work, first have to present their ideas in a formula appropriate to their own specialist discipline, and it is only when the new revelations are subsequently translated into a more general language that the non-scientist can begin to appreciate their value. As Bonaventura suggests, artists suffer from a lack of objective communicative skills. He suggests that young artists reject the links between their own art and the art of their predecessors and with other areas of human endeavour. But these kinds of link are severed almost at birth by narrow-minded educationalists who devalue visual thinking and subjugate or remove art practice from the mainstream school curriculum.

Bonaventura's challenge has first to be met by mainstream educators and those who choose to teach one form of art practice or another. Teachers of art should be as rigorous in their methodology as their counterparts who teach science. They would all do well to heed the advice on art education offered by Dr Rudolf Arnheim, the distinguished psychologist and educator. Ideally, Arnheim would provide potential young artists with the basic abilities needed for coping with every branch of the curriculum: by the teaching of philosophy (reasoning skills, understanding of the relation of the human mind to the world of reality, knowing the difference between right and wrong); by visual training (where the student learns to handle visual

phenomena as the principle means of organising thought); and by language training (enabling the student to communicate verbally the fruits of his thinking).

Is Bonaventura looking too passively and in the wrong direction for his own personal challenge in art?

Might I add that this visual thinker and reader of *Modern Painters* applauds the editorial decision to give room to consider the art of the past alongside the art of the present. The connections are there, relevant and empowering. Thank you for continuing to emphasise this fact.

Jean Wallis
Newbury
c/o: arthurwallis@compuserve.com

Smelling salts

Damn, great magazine – by far the best available.

Throughout the spring issue I experienced a wonderful exorcism from the nice canned art narratives other magazines put out. Not to gush, but *Modern Painters* forgoes the tidiness and the dumbing down (or around) that has infested much late twentieth-century art writing. As if we have it all figured out.

In fact, Tom Lubbock's review squarely puts the pin on the head of the angel ... then hammers it in. Theme show curators (often zealously) showcase their parochial vision, yoked to some bastardised sociological discourse.

Maybe it is the result of having playwrights interview artists, or including those ragged diary entries (Matthew Collings and Ron Padgett), but the end result was a real, incomplete and bumpy ride. If I want homogenisation, I will drink milk...

Your writers came out on top of the big Pollock rediscovery. Too much of the rhetoric is still focused on Greenberg. Pollock is better than that scorecard and those who reacted against it. In many ways Pollock (like a Martin Luther) is going to be the most prophetic and divisive 'article of faith' artist of our soon to be late century. Is it sacred or profane? blah blah blah... Who cares if it is critical crossroads for both the approving and the disapproving! No leash law for Pollock. Collings, Gayford and Hensher take him off the excyclema and the pedestal, and let his work piss on our shoes. Smelling salts.

Jeff Jahn
Portland, Oregon, USA
jeffjahn@mail.effectnet.com

P.S. Favourite cover... Spring 1999? [Pollock detail] – a close up for a West Coast USA person for whom London and NYNY are difficult to get to without extensive plans.

With feeling

I do not profess to be an authority on art, but I do appreciate any artist who can convey his, or her, feelings about the subject or object they are depicting in their work. However, having read about Pollock, the life, and then seen his paintings, one wonders whether critics and writers are not reading more into this work than is warranted.

If his mind was disturbed as a result of his lifestyle surely he was only depicting the torment he was suffering in its various phases – anger, terror or whatever mental processes he may have been experiencing at the time. The titles given to most of the paintings seem to attest to this.

Perhaps an analogy with Patrick Caulfield is not apposite, but at least Caulfield's art depicts a degree of mystery with his use of light and shadow, or even Eduardo Paolozzi and his impressions of place and people.

Are not impressionist or expressionist painters in the true meaning of the word more at one with the world and themselves?

Michael R Gattey Parker
Fareham, Hants

John Kirby

As a History of Art student, I write to express my sincere disappointment at *Modern Painters*' neglect of John Kirby's recent show 'Lost Child'. For a magazine that prides itself on, as the title suggests, 'Modern Painters' I feel this oversight is a great shame. It was a profoundly beautiful and haunting show that dealt not only with the complexities of childhood, but also, as in all his work, with the timeless, personal and universal aspects of human emotions and life.

I therefore urge you to look at the work of this painter whom I, and many of my colleagues, consider to be an important and lasting artist.

Richard Alltoft
Grimsby

The Editor requests
Letter-writers: please print your name at the head of your letter with your address.

Canaletto, *St. Mark's, Venice*

A Scene in Venice

After Canaletto

Ian Tromp

See how a window appears there,
opening onto the marketplace
so the whole scene gathers its light
and pours into a dimensionless room:
anonymous, somewhere on a street in Venice
looking out across a faceless piazza
and sloping to the water.

What we have is lines
and a world that fits itself
into a pattern of shadow and sunlight.
The air is still, somehow withheld
and yet so full the square feels whole,
as if his hand had dug the scene from silence.
The light says it, the cool flagstones ring with it:

we must not mourn what is not lost.

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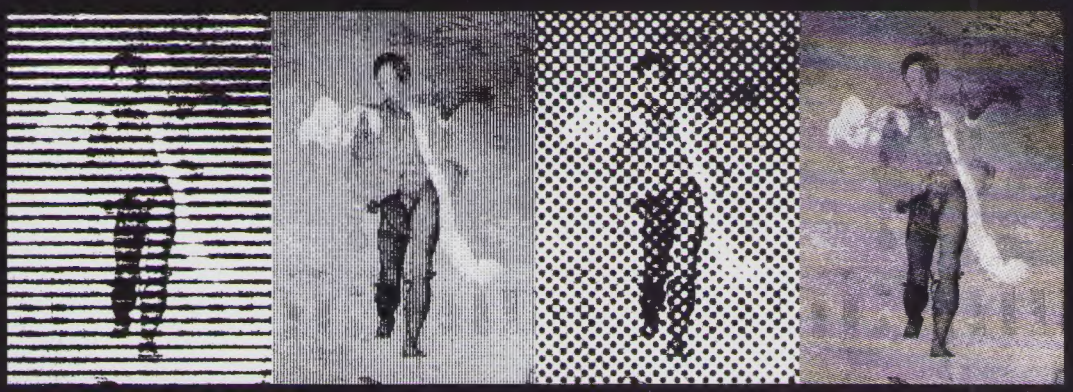

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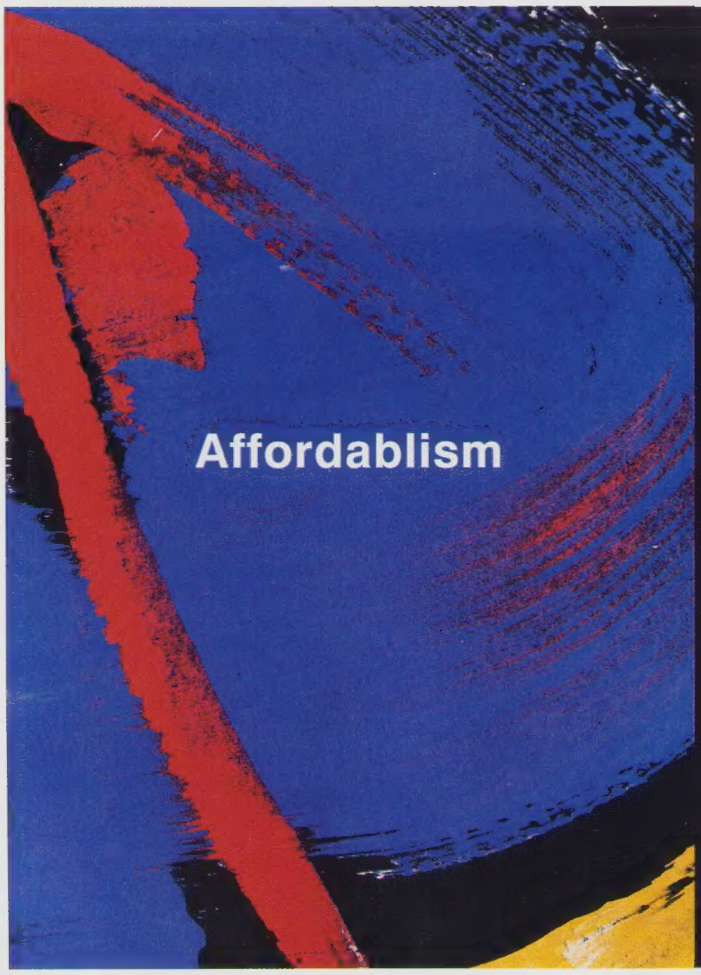

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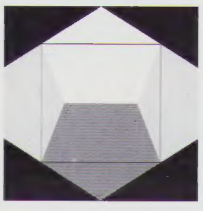

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The Royal Bath & West of England Society

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For further information please contact
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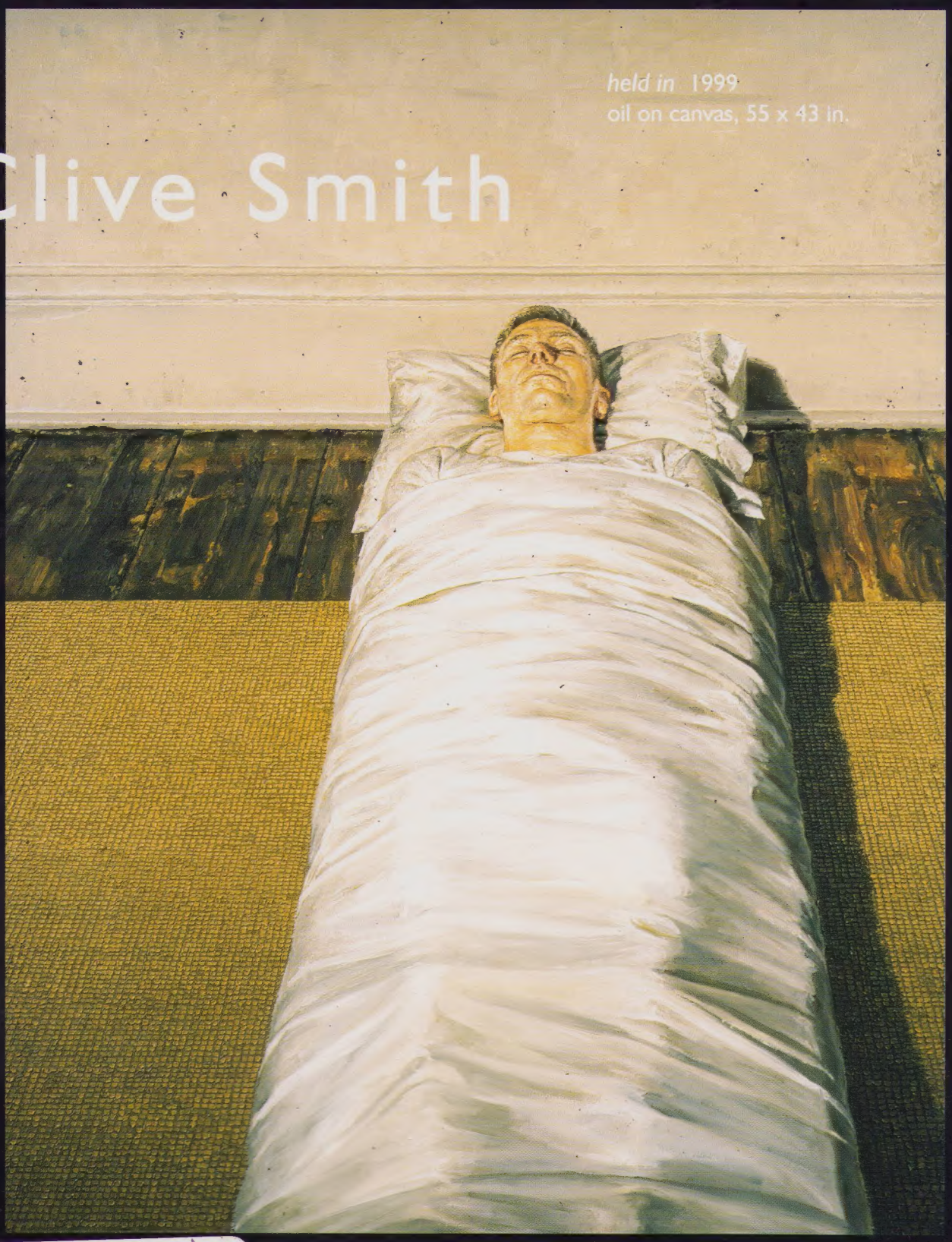

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